

MAX EH RMANN

*A POET'S LIFE*



*By*

BERTHA K. EH RMANN



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BERTHA K. EHLMANN

"This work is unique in arrangement and method. His own words substantiate what has been written here about Max Ehrmann. Here is a life of the spirit. Just as a life it is beautiful and worthwhile—so much food for thought. His poems are a fresh wind blowing across troubled days. They have gentleness, wisdom and universality. Years gave to Max Ehrmann wisdom and calm strength. I cherish the memory of as wise, gentle and witty a man as I have ever known."

*John Erle Grinnell, Dean  
Indiana State Teachers College*

Any biography of Max Ehrmann would be that of the inner life for above all else he was concerned with the spiritual meanings of life, the social problems of the day and how to live in a distracted world. His writings give counsel for wise living. His "Desiderata" and "A Prayer" will long remain his bequest to those who search for some helpful philosophy for living.

"Above all else he is a student of the deep problems of life . . . a philosophy of awareness and reconsideration of the real values of life. His road to happiness is strangely inviting."

*Indianapolis Star*

"There is wisdom in this book (the Poems)—wisdom garnered from a lifetime of sensitive response to a variety of experiences—wisdom characteristic of a

*(continued on back flap)*

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*By Max Ehrmann*

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BREAKING HOME TIES  
BE QUIET, I'M TALKING  
WORLDLY WISDOM  
LOVE FROM MANY ANGLES  
DESIDERATA  
A PRAYER

*By Bertha K. Ehrmann*

MAX EH RMANN: A POET'S LIFE  
THE WORTH OF A GIRL





MAX EH RMANN



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*A POET'S LIFE*

*By*  
BERTHA K. EHRMANN



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## PREFACE

I wish to leave a record of the life and writings of Max Ehrmann. In this short biography I have desired that the lovers of inspiring and courageous literature and the seekers of a spiritual life should know the kind of man who lived among them — that "things old and precious through association and memory and experience" might be kept for the country he loved so well.

Here is the record of a good man, a poet, playwright, and philosopher. Any biography of Max Ehrmann would be that of the inner life, for above all else he was deeply concerned with the spiritual meanings of life. This can best be shown in the words of his *Journal* from which I have quoted at length that he may speak for himself. The pattern of his life was admirable and in his life and thinking there are some wise suggestions as to how other lives might be lived.

The opinions expressed as to the merit of his writings are not mine. They are gathered from many volumes of newspaper articles, reviews, and letters from well known persons. For much of this material I am deeply grateful to friends of Max Ehrmann who through the years knew him well and have contributed to this record. They also have given me valuable suggestions.

BERTHA K. EH RMANN

*November, 1950*



MAX EHLMANN:

A POET'S LIFE



## Chapter 1

## THE FAMILY

*I remember the happy lives of my father and mother,  
and my brothers and sister, in my childhood.*

— JOURNAL

May 12, 1917. — My father and mother came to this country when they were young; here they were married and their children were born; here they toiled and loved and lived happily to old age; and here on a quiet, sunlit hillside they sleep. It is therefore my country, as they had made it theirs.

With these words Max Ehrmann opened his Journal in 1917 in which at frequent intervals through twenty years he wrote his thoughts. He was the son of Max Ehrmann and Margaret Barbara Lutz. Years of war had devastated Europe and all hopes of liberalism were gone. Because of the unsuccessful revolution of 1848 in Germany, the father, a youth of nineteen years, set forth alone from his home in Bavaria for America. He landed in New York, worked his way westward, and remained in Terre Haute. A year later the Lutz family, also from Bavaria, came to America, stopped in Terre Haute but went on to farms in Marshall, Illinois. The families in Germany had no knowledge of each other, yet the young Margaret Lutz and Max Ehrmann met in Terre Haute and were married. To them were born five children: Charles, Mathilda, Emil, Albert, and Max. The young Max Ehrmann was born September 26, 1872.



The first family home was a very small, one-story, brick house, and it seems incredible that seven persons could ever have lived in such a tiny place. The boys slept in the low half-story upstairs. On each side of the house was a small garden or yard which seemed to them very large for their play and ball games.

They were a busy, affectionate, and hard working family and the children always had happy memories of their parents and childhood. The father, Max Ehrmann, was a cabinet maker and during and after the Civil War he did the fine woodwork on the interior of Pullman cars for the Pennsylvania railroad. During the war the railroad was for several days under enemy fire and once the father was shot from a bridge but was not seriously hurt.

Their living was frugal yet sufficient. The boys adored the mother, a quiet woman of great sweetness of character. The father was strict, firm, and kind, and when he came home from work, silence settled upon the noisy, mischievous boys. The memory of their mother is commemorated in these lines from his poem, "Mother."

O mother of my childhood's pleasant days,  
Still whispering courage and dispelling fears —  
Are you a dream come from my younger years  
And know my triumphs or my inner tears?  
Your friends when you were young,  
Your own great hopes, your cheer and laughter free  
In some weird way are strangely haunting me.

December 25, 1932. — Christmas again. I am thinking of my childhood, my brothers, my sister and my parents, of the Christmas presents and laughter and happy times — long, long ago.

September 26, 1927. — My birthday. I suppose a sensible man would pay little attention to it, except perhaps to pay homage to his mother for the long years of care and solicitude



## THE FAMILY

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about his welfare. I remember my mother with great affection — a sweet-tempered woman of a little less than medium height, with light hair and of fair complexion. I remember many of her words of endearment. She is a sacred memory. More than once in critical moments I seem to have heard her whispering admonitions.

Max Ehrmann often said that the four husky boys and lively sister with their noise and incessant activity were a handful for the gentle little mother. In their later years these boys often told of one winter day when they were unusually noisy and unmanageable. For an hour five obstreperous children had been running wildly around the house. Time and again the mother asked, implored, commanded them to be quiet. But they paid no attention. Suddenly the distracted mother announced in stern voice that she was going to jump into the river. Astounded, the boys stood speechless, and in horror watched her put on her shawl, go out the door and up the street. She walked around the block, and coming home an hour later she found five weeping children, completely silenced and terrified. A picture of the little boy Max is given in the Journal.

January 13, 1921. — All day the snow has been falling, and the world outside is white . . . I am thinking of another snow-fall more than forty years ago. My father had brought me a pair of skates. It was night. I wished to go out and try my new skates on the sidewalk in front of the house, and he was telling me that I could not skate on the snow. Forty years! It was a different world and a different life. I can see the little boy pleading with his father to try his new skates on the sidewalk in front of the house. I call back to him. I say, "Hello, little boy. Where are you?" But I get no answer for I was in the far-distant after-years. But where is he — the little boy? It is still snowing and the world is white.



The father and mother had great love for each other. Evenings they read aloud from German magazines, books, and newspapers. Their reading was largely from the German classics. A bust of Schiller was a prized family possession, and his poems were often recited by the father. The Journal has many tributes to these parents.

June 1, 1924. — I remember my father in the days of my childhood always so in love with my mother that on entering our house the first thing he would say was, "Where is mama?" He often came home bringing her some gift, usually a mere trifle which nevertheless won him sweet words and often a kiss. I remember them reading together through the long evenings, she usually with the book, he interjecting a remark now and then. When he passed away, she lived with one great hope — which really was more of a conviction — that she soon would be with him, to live again through the thousand and one happy details of their daily lives that had endeared them to each other. That memory of my father and mother has been to me a testimonial in granite.

October 8, 1932. — Today I recalled some scenes of my pleasant childhood, and again saw my mother and father talking and reading by the evening lamp. It was all very real and very beautiful — this spanning the gap of fifty years. It put new life into me, new hope, and even new faith to fill out the remainder of my days as usefully as in me lies.

A frequent visitor at this early home was big, bluff Grandfather Christian Lutz from Marshall. The boys almost trembled as they gazed upon his long, fierce mustaches. Grandfather Lutz often told them of the first people going over to Marshall from Terre Haute, a distance of about sixteen miles. They had found their way through forests, breaking off branches from the trees



to show their paths which in time became the present highway from Terre Haute to Marshall. For years the road was filled with deep ruts and fearful mud. It took one day for the Lutz farmers to drive to Terre Haute with their farm products, and the next day they drove back.

Born in 1799, Grandfather Lutz had lived through and witnessed much of recent German history and often told the boys stories of his youth in Germany. He knew whereof he spoke. Wars, always wars! Grandfather Lutz's grandfather had fought in the bitter wars of the Austrian Succession. He himself had seen the disasters of Napoleon's retreat from Moscow, the ragged, starving French soldiers straggling back in the bitter winter cold through Germany to France. They looted German homes and ate all the food they could steal while the Germans themselves had to live on fruits and grasses. The roads of Germany were filled with confusion as horses and carriages piled up and wretched, wounded soldiers fell in the snow. The Lutz mustaches waved and trembled through these accounts. He told the boys how the Pope in Rome ordered all houses in Germany searched, of the papal soldiers who ransacked their own home looking for books and Bibles then forbidden to be read by the Catholic church. When the books were gathered he saw the great bon-fires in the public square. He told the boys of the days when he himself with Carl Schurz had fought in the Bavarian rebellion of 1848. On their defeat he and his family, sick of war and the failures of liberalism, with thousands of other German families had fled to America.

October 11, 1933.—Where is that thick-necked, double-chinned hero and tyrant of my childhood, my grandfather, Christian Lutz, and his friends who came over in sailing ships, and whose voices I still hear recounting the story of wars and trans-Atlantic travel eighty years ago?



August 13, 1922. — My father knew and loved Heidelberg and accounts of its charm were part of the riches of my childhood.

March 15, 1919. — Over forty years ago my sister Mathilde used to sing a song called "The Blue Alsatian Mountains." She was about fifteen years old and I was five or six. This evening I read in the *Literary Digest* of the recent expulsion of some German citizens from Colmar in the Vosges Mountains, the Alsatian Mountains of my childhood. Forty years! It is from the morning of childhood to the mid-afternoon of maturity. I cannot be unhappy about my past. The fierce lights are now mellowed on the canvas of memory. "The Blue Alsatian Mountains" is now touched with fresh emotions of the Great War but it has made pleasant an hour with lovely memories.

Upon these early family recollections of Europe and wars, Prussian officers, and German tyranny the young Max pondered. At an early age he was reading and studying the history of his own country which he so loved and wrote about.

As the children had grown older the family moved to a large, comfortable brick house where there was plenty of room for growing young people. The children attended the public schools, and Max often spoke in later years of the kind and beautiful young teacher, Louise Peters, who told the children so much of life outside of textbooks and inspired him to read many books. The family attended the nearby German Methodist Church and every Sunday the boys went to Sunday school and in the afternoon to "Catechism."

March 28, 1923. — When a little boy, on Saturdays I went to "catechism." There were ten to fifteen boys usually present. The minister, a kindly, elderly man, named Barth, asked us questions, such as, Who made the world? What was the order



of creation? How was Jesus the Son of God? etc. The meetings were held in the Sunday School of our church.

On one such morning, the questioning being finished, the Rev. Barth with earnestness spoke to us some such words: "I want you boys to think of Jesus every day — this week, next week, next month, all your lives!" He told us that now he was an old man, that Jesus had walked by his side all his days, that Jesus had been a light, etc. I never have forgotten his earnest face. I tried to obey the minister's words and often to think of Jesus. I always saw him as portrayed in a picture that hung in the bedroom of my father and mother. Though I early completely shook off the Jesus legend, all my life, whenever I have visualized him, he was like that picture. And this is true through the nineteen years that I studied and pondered him in preparation for the writing of *Jesus: A Passion Play*. How confused I was as a boy, trying to think of Jesus in accordance with the minister's commands. In competition with baseball, skating, bicycle riding, or gathering nuts in the autumn, Jesus had no standing with me at all. One day a playfellow suggested that we steal some pears. I remember that I thought the portrait in my mother's room would be displeased. I told my mother of the circumstance and she thought me a very good little boy. It is pleasant to recall this vividly colored memory of an age that is gone. I wonder — are there still little boys who try to please Jesus?

June 21, 1917. — It is Sunday evening. The church bells are ringing. I so often have criticized the church, how can it be that the sound of these bells is pleasing to me? The bells recall my childhood, my father and mother, my sister and brothers. In that distant household, now growing ever more dim in my memory, the church was a real factor. It was indeed the place which the Maker of all things visited. To my father and mother,



God was very near. Almost daily I heard them speak to Him. I think it must be the recollection of a happy childhood that gives to these Sunday evening church bells a sweet and lovely sound. I leap over the forty years that separate my childhood from the present—the present wherein all things are so different—a world in chaos.

With the passing years the father, with his eldest son Charles, engaged in the coal business with mines in Ehrmanndale, Indiana. In their coal offices the young Max Ehrmann worked for a time.

October 19, 1933.—Back from college one summer I helped my brother Charles lay out Ehrmanndale, near his coal mine. The town flourished, soon containing a few hundred houses. Thirty years later, being in that neighborhood, I decided to revisit the place to see how it had prospered in the march of time. It was indicated on the road map and I followed the direction but still found myself in the country. I asked a boy on a mule, "Where can I find Ehrmanndale?" "Hell, you're in it now," he replied. Nothing was left of the town founded by my brother. Houses had been bodily moved away; weathering and piecemeal theft had finished the rest. All things change from the fall of the Roman Empire to the fall of Ehrmanndale.

His interest in the law started in these early teens when working in this coal office. In those distant days of no automobiles, many lawyers of Terre Haute walked to their offices in the Court House or nearby buildings. As they passed the coal offices the young Max greeted them and walked with them, listening to their stories of Terre Haute history and people and life. He saw to it that he would have some question to ask them as they passed, some thought to draw them out to talk about their cases.



He even imagined that some day he too might be a lawyer. This early "manoeuvring" led him to study law as well as philosophy at Harvard. In after years when he passed that coal office, he often said to himself, "Little boy, you had such dreams." All his days Max Ehrmann was reading and studying outside of his work — preparing.

February 1, 1931. — In boyhood I prepared for college. At college I prepared to teach philosophy and to write. Later I prepared to practice law. All my life I have been preparing and, after a fashion, doing the thing for which I prepared.

Then came a happy day for him. His brother Charles, realizing his brother's interests and ambitions, made it possible for him to enter DePauw University. Childhood days were over. While Max Ehrmann was in his senior year at DePauw the beloved father passed away.

April 14, 1922. — Twenty-nine years ago tonight my father passed out of this life. This afternoon, in a drizzling rain, I stood by his grave and said a prayer; after which I said aloud two poems I often had heard him recite, one by Hauff, "Margenrot," the other beginning, "Dreifach ist der Schritt der Zeit" (Threefold is the March of Time). My memory of him is dear to me. He was a diligent, loving father and he did all in his power to show us the true path of life — industry, honor, and the forward look. My mother once told me she had never known him dishonorable in word or deed.

Twenty-nine years! It was the evening of the Victorian Age, a different world. How many times in these years I have pled for one assurance that he still lives! I could understand now his experiences in youth, his and his father's connection with the Revolution of 1848 in his native country, his arrival alone in New York in the early fifties, and his westward wandering



to this new country of Indiana. "I am a man now, dear father; I could understand you now. Let me think quietly of you and the dim past. Let me assure myself that all is well and that in some happy world I shall know you again, and still be your son."



## Chapter 2

### COLLEGE YEARS

*Other unnumbered centuries will come and go  
In man's adventure on this restless grain of dust.  
Why all this learning, if we do not strive to know  
The Road, the Inn, the Keeper that we trust?*

— CENTENNIAL ODE

College years for Max Ehrmann at DePauw University were happy days full of serious work and many friends. Above all they were full of purpose, for at DePauw he dedicated himself to a useful life—some worthy cause—and all his life he was faithful to that dedication. Many times through the years he returned to Greencastle to renew his early inspiration and recapture the ideals of those days. He often remarked that he found at Greencastle a kind of spiritual home. The dreamy little village with its stately shade trees, small homes and gardens, the ivy-covered college buildings and campus—all surrounded by the distant hills—here were peace and an environment of scholarship. The decade of the nineties for all college students was a time of idealism and romanticism. The teachings of Browning, Tennyson, and Emerson dominated literature and education. The world was more or less finished. A student was to find his place and do his work. God was a personal friend of all youth.

July 14, 1924.—I remember once, in the dreamy, anxious days of youth, having climbed the only tower at DePauw Uni-



versity, I looked westward toward my native city and lifted my hands in a vow that I would dedicate my life to some great cause, that my native city might be proud of me. Boyish whim! Yet how many boys under a like spell have taken a similar, sacred vow. Sacred? Yes; for often it is these vows in the glorious, incandescent days of youth that give the only glow there is in the long, laborious years that follow.

September 29, 1920. — (Passing through Greencastle, en-route to New York) Here, more than twenty-five years ago, I promised God to be gentle all my life and to pursue only high ideals, even though I should remain poor. Here it was I looked into the face of the night and resolved to try to write beautiful books. Twenty-five years! Have I kept my word? The train is pulling out. Lovely Greencastle, Good-bye.

At DePauw Max Ehrmann was a member of the Delta Tau Delta fraternity and editor of the college paper, the *DePauw Weekly*. Greencastle was a world of youth, dear friendships, romance, and interesting work around which through all the years there was to him a beautiful halo.

April 9, 1921. — Last night I dreamed of my days at DePauw University. I was young again, and I wandered again in that lovely, green little world. Dear old friends came out of the peaceful past. Somehow, the dream has left a hurt. Is it the merciless flight of time? Is it the retrospect showing so little accomplished? Life is passing and I shall be numbered with things forgotten. Not only followers of beauty, but all men fervently engaged in any pursuit are continually striving to bring about in the outer world a more perfect expression of the plans in their private, inner world. Trade, marble, iron — everything is the material that men endeavor to fashion in the image of the dream picture. In some other world will this universal craving for expression be satisfied?



Through all the DePauw days and in the after years, Max Ehrmann enjoyed the friendship of Professor Henry Longdon, who admired the seriousness and interests of the young idealist. Many were their friendly talks with wise advice and encouragement for the student. Every year there came a letter from Professor Longdon on his birthday, September 26, congratulating him on his writings and encouraging him to further efforts. In a letter to Professor Longdon in 1938 Max Ehrmann wrote: "You ask if my philosophy is standing the strain of the years. The world as constituted today has subjected us all to a tremendous strain. Sometimes I am utterly blind; but most of the time I can still see beyond the clouds. Perhaps a man's inner life is understood only by himself. I, myself, am not out of the woods. I keep on going in the hope of keeping my early promises to myself. It is a beautiful world but our human relations are still barbarous. It is this latter cause I still think worth striving for. Thanks for the pleasant memories of that far-away world of Greencastle nearly fifty years ago."

In an article in the *Boston Herald* during his Harvard days, Max Ehrmann wrote of having visited DePauw at Commencement time. "I went back to the old college from which I graduated. It was commencement time which always brings back some of the 'old boys and girls' to their alma mater home. Those foolish, insipid, loud, and intolerant college boys, who made the lives of the citizens in the little college town insecure and who, all the people predicted, would come to nothing good — these very boys are now stalwart, manly men. They studied in the same library, played the same pranks, raved over the same 'profs,' went in the same societies, and received their diplomas from the same prexy's hand. Now the graduate, filled with ideals and idols, knows not whither to direct his footsteps. However much the college man has yet to learn after he leaves his alma mater, it is glorious to have gone to



college; and if rightly directed, one's life may retain some of that lustre."

Max Ehrmann graduated from DePauw in 1894. In 1938 he was invited to write the commemorative Ode for the DePauw Centennial Celebration. His Centennial Ode of twenty-five stanzas read upon this occasion has been called "an unsurpassed commentary" upon education. Bishop G. Bromley Oxnam called it "beautiful and thought inspiring, replete with unforgettable phrases."

What is this thing called learning if it lead nowhere  
But to the shrill harangues of parlor dissonance?  
Wake up, far-scattered Sons and Daughters, do your share  
To turn the sordid scenes of life into romance!

Now the young people at home had grown up; the family was scattering — business, marriages — and Max Ehrmann went to Harvard.

#### DEPAUW REVISITED

Is this the very place I knew so well!  
These lofty trees, in leafy green array —  
Are these the slender saplings of my day?  
These old, remembered buildings — how they quell  
The heart's despair! And here fond memories dwell  
On long-forgotten scenes. I used to stray  
Along this path; she often came this way.  
We walked together as the twilight fell.  
Here for my future I conceived a scheme  
Of beautiful, courageous, useful years,  
Inspiring joy and solacing of tears.  
I little knew I should sometimes blaspheme,  
Because of all my failures and my fears.  
Yet I am glad that I still have my dream.

In the fall of 1894 Max Ehrmann entered the post-graduate School of Philosophy at Harvard University where for two years he specialized in law and philosophy. During this time he was also president of the Northern Division of the Delta Tau



Delta Fraternity, and editor of the *Rainbow*, national magazine of that fraternity. All his life these Harvard years were precious memories and opened many windows for him not only upon the inner life of thought but upon the outside world of problems — problems of good and evil and the struggle for a living.

Max Ehrmann was fortunate to have studied under that famous galaxy of professors, James, Münsterberg, Palmer, Santayana, and Royce. Once in a street car he sat beside the historian, John Fiske. They fell into conversation, got off at the same corner, and walked several blocks together. Fiske invited him to his home and thus began an interesting acquaintance. These famous scholars profoundly influenced Max Ehrmann and deepened his philosophical and spiritual interests.

August 13, 1922. — I knew Harvard in its golden age of scholarship. Lowell had died the year before I came to Cambridge, and Holmes, during my first year there. I knew Harvard in the days of James, Royce, Palmer, Münsterberg, Santayana, then a young man, Charles Eliot Norton, and Charles Eliot. Time has shown the richness of their intellectual fruits. Learning, if it perish not, will cherish their names. Royce, Palmer, and Münsterberg were my teachers, and I often attended the lectures of James and Charles Eliot Norton. I was at James's house several times at philosophical conferences.

Münsterberg was in the second year of his twenty-five years at Harvard. He delivered orations on psychology in broken English. I still see him and hear his voice. In his psychological laboratory I made experiments. He was indefatigable not only in his search for truth but in imparting it, and he transformed a merely interesting science into a most utilitarian one. He was one of our great war losses. Though wise in many things, he was wrong on the war.

Here was the beloved James, that romantic philosopher with the laughing heart; he had a business-like air, talked rapidly,



and was brilliant in repartee. And Royce, the gentle one, with the dreamy eyes, lecturing on metaphysical subjects as if he were dictating to a stenographer yet seeing in fancy the TOTALITY, the WHOLE, the ONENESS, and finding peace in the vision.

December 11, 1934. — I remember another December forty years ago in Cambridge, when all the glory and the world was before me. How different — youth's bright dream of the world and maturity's stern knowledge! At Harvard, under Josiah Royce, I studied Kant, Hegel, Schopenhauer, Deussen, and Bradley; under Hugo Münsterberg, experimental psychology; and under Herbert Palmer, ethics. In those luminous days I fancied soon I must find the key that unlocks the door. Now I know that no one has a key that unlocks the door.

March 22, 1922. — In rereading the *Letters of Charles Eliot Norton* this evening I found the account of his entertainment on the Christmas eves from 1886 on, of some of the stray students left in Cambridge during the Harvard holidays. I was one of the students entertained on Christmas Eve in 1894. He handed me a small object and said lovingly, "Mr. Ruskin gave me this." Norton was a lovely soul. The memory of him is a dear possession despite the thirty years since that Christmas Eve. Besides the revelations of a gentle soul that these letters mainly show, there is here the saddening thought of the futility of all things; the going down into the dust of our whitest hopes and dearest aspirations. To learn to live without hope — that seemed to him a very great achievement.

March 19, 1936. — I have been reading Santayana's *Dialogues in Limbo*. O dear memory! The book recalled my graduate years at Harvard (where I had a slight acquaintance with Santayana) when I was much absorbed in the many subtleties of the metaphysical Whichness of the What. One day Santayana invited me to walk with him to Brookline where he and his mother lived. I recall vividly the charm of the man,



affable, genial, even at that time ripe in scholarship. One evening Santayana was to entertain the Philosophical Conference at his rooms in the Yard. He had a buffet lunch prepared. I was the only one who came. We two alone, ate, drank a little beer, and talked a couple of hours. I recall but one thing he said: He had just published a book of poems and when he came to settle with Scribners for the book he owed them five dollars. He had given away a few copies. I wish I could remember what we talked about. That evening was more than forty years ago.

In addition to his regular studies Max Ehrmann was a member of a few philosophical discussion groups of advanced students, meeting often at the homes of the professors. He enjoyed the long walks and trips in the literary and historical environs of Boston. His roommate for two years was Dr. Kendrick Babcock who later became Dean of the College of Liberal Arts at the University of Illinois. Their friendship continued through the years. They visited each other, and Max Ehrmann often wrote of him in his Journal.

Also during these years at Harvard Max Ehrmann wrote articles for the *Boston Herald* about life at Harvard, some of which were later incorporated in his early book, *A Farrago*. A few sketches are here given of Harvard and Boston and some of his thinking at that time.

"A Japanese lecturing on American colleges said that Harvard was a place where young men played football and on rainy days read books. It has a germ of truth. These Harvard students carry canes, umbrellas, fencing foils, guns and tennis rackets. One wonders whether Harvard is a university or a picnic ground. Spectacles of some sort are as essential to good taste as the latest style in clothing. The pipe habit has a strong hold on Harvard students. The word 'student' one never hears. It is always the 'Harvard Man.'"

"You will scarcely find people anywhere more contented



with their surroundings than the residents of Boston. It is no part of their education to know whether Indianapolis is the capital of North Dakota or Kentucky. They are not extremely wealthy, but very critical in matters of science and art. The theatre is loved like the church. The Bostonian is as proud of the history of his town as a small boy of his first long trousers. The women are full of ideas and entertaining talk and people are judged more by breeding and learning than by money. Instead of being shown millionaires, the scholars are pointed out and the historic places connected with their memory and with Boston."

"There is no formula of happiness with which anyone need try to buy off the disenchanting features of life. Experience is always bought at a high figure; and all the optimistic babble in the world will not heal the wounds of sorrow."

"Not long ago I heard a speech by a man who had been for twenty years a member of the Senate of the United States. The people were wild with enthusiasm as the orator fairly thundered in power and splendor. He looked like a thing immortal when he made that speech, but on this rainy day he is in his grave. I am not so much reminded of the exit of one mortal from this world as of the death and burial of humanity itself. There they come, the hoary giants, marching down the corridors of time toward the generation in which I live; and soon they will stand before it as they have stood before every other. The rolling echo of their steps is now drowning the petty voices of fames of generations that have been, and will soon delegate us to the same speechless oblivion."

"Scholars seek truth, to know truth is wisdom; but to know truth concocted with much falsehood is greater wisdom, has fewer dregs and is all that holds the world together. Nothing short of enthusiasm for some province of life's activity will prevent a man from jumping into the black abyss. One must



chase a phantom — and vigorously too! — to get the most out of life."

"It is harder to get pleasure out of continued idleness than out of continued work. One may have too much time as well as too little. When one has nothing to do, he is likely to attempt a quarrel with God concerning the mistakes in the construction of the universe."

"Old people ought to be careful not to disenchant youth of its rainbow gleams; but they are continually doing it. 'When you get as old as I am, then you will see thus and so,' says the old man, with no juice in his crusty memory to recall how much joy he got out of courting his wife fifty years ago (to say nothing of marrying her)! Many are the delusions of youth. That is why it is so rich in happiness. But these fall away like husks from the grain; yet in prudent persons they will not all fall away."

It was at Harvard College that Max Ehrmann met Eugene Debs. In an article in the *Twentieth Century Magazine* in 1910 Max Ehrmann wrote:

"The first time I heard Mr. Debs was when I was a student at Harvard. He was booked to lecture at Prospect Union, Cambridge. This was shortly after the Chicago strike and a good many Harvard students and instructors came out to see the 'monster.' Debs was late but the audience waited. When he came there was no applause. He began to speak and for more than two hours he held that audience as if riveted to the seats; and they who had come to scorn hovered around him for more than an hour and went away his friends. It was more than half an hour before I could get to the speaker's stand and shake hands with him. The night before he had spoken to one of the largest audiences ever crowded into Faneuil Hall, Boston. Dr. John Clarke Ridpath, editor of the *Arena*, afterwards told



me that he feared the audience would 'tear him to pieces' trying to shake his hand. The next time I heard Debs was in Denver. The crowd was so great I could not get within fifty feet of the door of the largest public hall in that city. The next day was celebrated as Debs Day in Denver. Everybody wore Debs badges.

"No man in America has been more hated and few have been so much loved as Eugene Debs. His opinions are considered by men in high places as the countersign of bloodshed, anarchy and riot and by others they are regarded as the beacon light that is to lead humanity to a better civilization. Whatever may be said of his philosophy he has won a place in American history as one of its great orators. He resorts to no tricks of rhetoric, no claptrap and stage effects, no pretence of deep emotion. He stands frankly before his audiences and opens his mind and heart with terrible invective or the sweet waters of human kindness.

"In some ways our distinguished fellow-townsmen has wandered a stranger in the city of his birth. Here we have been the last to acknowledge his power and influence. We see him often, recognize him as a quiet, respected citizen, possessing those domestic virtues that all men and women admire; but the great Debs, the Debs who first arraigned the trust abuses in this country, who broke the first ground for the harvest of modern popular reform — that Debs we have never yet recognized, whatever one may think of his doctrines."

As the college days of Max Ehrmann were coming to an end, questions of his future were ever before him. From the life of the scholar he was to plunge into the chaos of earning a living. A fragment of a letter to his mother remains, showing the dread and uncertainty of a future poet coming to grips with reality, yet with high purpose and consecration to some noble cause.



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THE RAINBOW OF DELTA TAU DELTA

MAX EH RMANN, *Editor-in-chief*

January 23, 1895  
Cambridge, Mass.

Dear Mother:

I received your letter. I am always glad to hear from you. I would write you a German letter but it takes so long.

We are having examinations now. Lectures will begin again February 11. Of course you would like to know about my future. I tell you honestly I would like to know myself. I have hopes to be a writer. I do not tell this to everybody, because thousands of others have the same hopes. But years will tell. If I have any ideas that the world will be glad to read, then I may succeed; if I have not such ideas, then I shall fail. It is a risk, a chance. This much is sure — if I fail, I have my education, and that no man can take away, and with it I ought to be able to make a living. Of course I might study law, and settle down some place and be a successful lawyer and make money, even hold some political office. But what are these things compared with a place in the hearts of the people as a writer of good and inspiring books? The world is full of books; every month turns out hundreds. Some are fair but most all are poor, and very few are good. I might turn out poor books now. I must bide my time. I believe some day I might write a good one. . . .

MAX



## Chapter 3

### THE CROWDED WORLD

*I know this world is full of injustice. But it is your business and mine to earn a living and on the margin of our days of labor to lift our voices for justice, that the world may be softened and in some future happy time become a fit abode for the great heart of man.*

— JOURNAL

Now began the struggle of a young poet to earn a living. Hard work was no new experience for Max Ehrmann. In school and coal office, preparing for college; in college doing double tasks with the editing of college magazines and writing for newspapers, he was always preparing for the time when he might devote himself to literary work.

In his last year at Harvard, by the advice of a professor, he had corresponded with a then famous minister (whose letters still exist) who advised him not to enter the ministry where there was less opportunity for independent thought and advancement. Writing of this experience in later years, he saw the advantages of such a career but also another point of view.

October 24, 1918.—If you are young, ally yourself with some well-established institution. She will protect you in your callow years. With industry and talent and if you do not disturb her foundations, in your old age you may have climbed to a seat in her councils. This is true of commerce and politics as of the church. This is the thing I did not do in youth. I never could belong to anything. In college I had four talented young



friends. Two were real students, seekers of the truth. The other two were ambitious. All went into the ministry. After several years one of them gave up his work and went into business. In college he had been most brilliant but he could no longer preach the doctrine. The other truth-seeker had struggled for several years. But he finally succeeded, upon pragmatic grounds, in so readjusting his mental machinery as to be able to continue in the ministry. But his delays, doubts and struggles cost him much in the way of advancement. The other two gave themselves body and soul to the Church. They became quite proficient in harmonizing the teachings of science with Biblical statements about nature. Once I heard one of them speak to a large audience for fully an hour, endeavoring to prove the resurrection of Jesus by quotations from the Bible. There was no question as to the value of the testimony. The flock was pleased with the oratorical exercise of its champion. Both became prosperous and respected.

What Max Ehrmann wanted to do was to teach philosophy. He had much correspondence with several universities, and the contract with a western university was all but signed when a requirement was added that every Sunday afternoon he was to preach in some outlying district. But this was impossible. Thus for the time ended the prospect of teaching philosophy. Returning to Terre Haute, he started work seriously on his early novels and poems.

March 27, 1922.—When I was at DePauw University, in the sunlit days of youth, I resolved not to embrace the one conventional aim of life, to become rich. In those days it seemed to me quite enough to ask of life that I try to write beautiful books. Even small success in such an undertaking is not to be despised. Alas! Such an end in life is not to be spoken aloud. I soon discovered that, if it became known that one pursued any



object for the mere love of the labor without any thought of money rewards, one would be looked upon with suspicion — even contempt. To work for a purpose not involving returns in money, is beyond the comprehension of both the hand-worker and the business man. The former will say, "He is crazy," and the latter, "Keep an eye on him." I soon found that I must pretend to be writing for money; and what is more, I must create the impression that I am making it. Mankind will have to travel a long way before it realizes that the creation of beauty, in which there is unpaid artistry for the love of one's fellows, will be thought a sufficient excuse for a human life.

June 24, 1923. — One's heart goes out to struggling youth ambitious for literary success. I know these laborious days and tossing nights when nothing prospers. In youth one wants so much — wealth, love, fame, happiness. It is given to few to have all these, for luck or fate plays so tremendous a hand in the game of life. In this upward struggle the young man is to work, be patient, and expect little reward beyond the joy of the labor. When I think of the thousands of young persons now struggling to be successful novelists, I am filled with pity. Who will buy all those novels?

Through the next ten years, in spite of many frustrations and rejection slips, six books by Max Ehrmann were published, which shows his steady work. Yet he soon realized he could not make a living by writing poetry and drama. The pursuit of any Fine Art cannot support any artist in America. So he took up the practice of law, was admitted to the bar, and became a deputy prosecuting attorney.

March 28, 1931. — For two years I was a deputy states attorney, dealing daily with filthy minds and bodies; for the witnesses against criminals frequently are of the same class. Often after closing the office at night, I opened all the windows,



burned incense, and read Emerson, Amiel, Maurice De Guerin, or some other book of sweeter air. Thus keeping mental balance, I saved myself from desperation.

Now he had his own office in the Court House. Every morning there came before him a procession of gamblers, drunks, prostitutes, and lesser criminals. Hearing their stories, the young student of philosophy was overwhelmed even with the sight of such dregs of humanity and the social conditions that produced them. Deep discouragement filled his soul, yet out of these experiences came his poems and writings of social protest.

October 19, 1933.—This morning I revisited the Criminal Court where, more than thirty years ago, I was the prosecutor. Now another judge sits upon the bench. The bench itself is new. Other reporters, other court officials, other policemen and detectives, other lawyers prosecuting and defending, other endless processions of accused. All is changed. No, not all. The smell is the same.

For several years Max Ehrmann took an active part in politics and made many speeches for the Democratic party in county and congressional districts. He was offered several offices in city and county and, when he was twenty-five years old, the nomination for the state senate. Later a position as consul to a small country in South America was offered him but, wishing a literary career, he refused them all. He had discovered that politics was no place for a young poet.

Also in these busy early years Max Ehrmann had plunged into other activity, giving talks before literary groups and church societies on scientific and literary subjects or readings from his early poems. For several years he was president of the Terre Haute Literary Club, still a strong cultural influence in the city,



and read a paper every year. His subjects show his wide interests. "A Century of American Literature," "Some Canons of Art," "The Pessimism of Schopenhauer," "A New Conception of God," "Survival of the Fittest," etc. Newspaper accounts of the time show that "now at the age of twenty-six Max Ehrmann is already known as a thinker and reformer on public questions." Several of these lectures and readings from his own *Breaking Home Ties* were given before the Century Club of Indianapolis, which led to his programs being taken over by the Central Lyceum Bureau of Indianapolis for readings through the mid-west.

In the same years that James Whitcomb Riley was giving readings from his poems Max Ehrmann was starting his readings from his own poems. In 1903 when Riley spoke before a packed audience at the Grand Opera House in Terre Haute, Max Ehrmann introduced him. This led to an acquaintance with Riley that continued through the years. Max Ehrmann visited him frequently in his home in Indianapolis. Once, after an evening with Riley, he wrote the charming sonnet to Riley starting:

Tell me — who gave to you the key of hearts  
That childhood holds within its budding breast — <sup>1</sup>

June 17, 1917. — Riley was a genial, unpretentious man. He bore his fame modestly and was a lovable character. One evening at his home, pointing to a row of his books, he said to me: "There's not a reproach in any of them." Hence, perhaps, his lack of any criticism of entrenched power; hence also it was that I, a "harmless" youth and not Debs, his lifelong friend, was asked to introduce him when he read his poems in Terre Haute. Riley had gentleness and a keen eye for the personal joys and sorrows of the plain people. He did not see the social causes of

<sup>1</sup> The Poems of Max Ehrmann, 1948. Bruce Humphries, Inc. Boston.



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those personal sorrows. He was a poet of the people. He wrote of such things as touched intimately the heart of mankind. He brought solace and laughter to thousands and so his life made for amelioration. He sang of a culture that already has passed away and now are only lovely memories in an age of machines and haste.

July 21, 1921.— (Brown County, Indiana) This afternoon on horseback I crept for miles over the narrow paths to the home of Marcus Dickey, biographer of James Whitcomb Riley. On the porch of this house that overlooks the world, without saying a word, I held out my hand; he took it and after a moment's reflection pronounced my name. We had met but once, eighteen years before, when I introduced Riley to the audience in my native city. We talked of olden times and of life and art and the future of poetic forms and of Riley and his place in our letters. The infinite sky, the far-reaching horizon, and the tender green of the lovely world stretching out at our feet lifted me up once more. I found, too, "A Prayer" hanging in the house. Mr. Dickey said: "You have been with us all the time."

Such a full, strenuous life inevitably proved too severe for him and resulted in an illness of several months from typhoid fever. To recuperate he spent three months in Columbia, South Carolina, and there, in a dark hour of discouragement, he wrote "A Prayer." In despair he threw it into a waste basket from which it was rescued by a friend. On publication it was an immediate success.

On his recovery Max Ehrmann became lawyer and credit manager in the manufacturing firm of his brothers. Here at his desk, for ten years he earned his living.

May 13, 1932.— A young poet worked in an overall factory from eight-thirty till six o'clock for several years. He sat



up late at night and wrote, what he thought, a book of beautiful poems. The factory kept his body alive and the poems his soul. But burning the candle at both ends was a strain on his health.

In spite of the improved environment, the work was distasteful to him, but a living had to be earned. He was miserable not only from the effects of his illness but from his thwarted efforts for spiritual and poetic expression and from lack of encouragement and appreciation. The difficulties of these years among the noisy machines and the soul-killing interests of the business world were hard to bear.

March 28, 1931. — Memories: for ten years I worked in the office of a large factory, where, had it not been for some other enterprise of the mind in leisure hours, I should have died. During these years I wrote my book of poems out of the thoughts and feelings of my experience. Each night I washed my soul. Perhaps the work in the factory was more important than the poems. But the writing of my poems, the nightly purging of my soul of the daily dross, kept me in fair humor with life and prevented me from some desperation. Some writers eagerly ply on, living modestly, suffering neglect and abuse — all that they may experience the joy of creation and know the thrill and warmth of being a little understood.

March 10, 1933. — In my youth when I was thrust into the world to earn a living, first as a lawyer and later as a business man, I was overwhelmed by the brutality of human relations. The ethics of business were repellent to me — the sharp trading, the subterranean influences, the grinding down of the worker. The fault is less in human nature than in our economic system. We shall emerge from this primitive economics. The ideal that the treasure of the world is the property of all who will



bear part of the burden, will become a reality. For a hundred years we shall move steadily toward the left. Then what?

October 19, 1918.—I have been thinking what my life and work might have been in other conditions. In this way, no doubt, most men console themselves. I was a specialist in ideals. But ideals, unless having to do with mechanics, are not marketable. I have written some beautiful books but not many persons read them. Money, advertising alone, will beckon to the people. But money also will free for flight the loftiest thoughts of the star gazer. The creator of beautiful things needs bread but the maker of useless, often harmful things, must have champagne. Most of my friends are well advanced in their careers. I alone seem not yet to have started. With my friends I shall always be quite cheerful—frivolous at times. But in the house of my early hope I shall sit solitary, now and then, and think how much more nearly I might have embodied my visions of beauty had my lot fallen in other circumstances.

September 1, 1921.—I have not had much worldly success. Certain ideals have contributed to keep me from it. I cannot speak into a megaphone. I cannot be the actor. When the time comes for me to paint my face and speak in a histrionic voice, I falter and ask myself, "Is it worth the price?" Why must the artist so often be also the mountebank?

In 1917 the *Drama Magazine*, writing of his life, said: "Max Ehrmann suffered the usual trials and tribulations of the young writer. However, he went on his way disregarding the lack of appreciation which is the common lot and often the undoing of the writer serving his novitiate." There was no way for an unknown, mid-western poet with a message to break into the eastern magazines under pallid and conventional editorships. He considered living in New York for a while where he might



meet literary people, as did William Vaughn Moody and others; but he disliked the prospect of the turmoil of cities and the tragedy of struggling writers. Here he did have work in law and business.

October 7, 1932. — What as satisfying as the approval of one's kin. I went to Harvard. My five nephews, as they grew up, looked me over critically — and went to Yale.

The German poet, Rainer Maria Rilke, has well described in his letters these miseries of artists in the struggle for a living. He knew them well. He wrote: "It is the most tragic fate of young people who sense that it will be impossible for them to live without being poets or painters or sculptors, that they do not find true counsel, all plunged in an abyss of foresakenness as they are."<sup>1</sup>

The popular attitude of those days toward the artist and even of today is: "If you can write, write for money as other writers do." A publisher of a large house in New York said to him, "Write just one novel to make a killing and then do your other work." Yet Max Ehrlmann knew, as every artist knows, that to write for money and to create a beautiful work of art at the same time is impossible. He needed financial and moral encouragement. Yet always his faith in his own ability sustained him. In his Journal he wrote, "I march to music that they do not hear." He was young, full of constructive thoughts and plans. Few could sympathize with his artistic yearnings, his cherished ambitions — not superficial, fancy dreams extraneous to life, but practical dreams concerned with life itself as his poems show. He could not write to entertain — he had to find some meaning in life — he had a message.

September 29, 1920. — How about those promises to oneself, promises stretching through a lifetime, such as I made to my-

<sup>1</sup> *Letters of Rainer Maria Rilke*. W. W. Norton and Company, 1945.



self back in Greencastle a quarter of a century ago? At times this requires one to continue a chosen path in the face of reason, sense, hope, reputation — everything! How strong the voice of reason saying "Change your work, you have made a mistake." For no matter what great enterprise has been laid to heart, there come days when faith is low, doubt whispers, distrust complains. Then it must be remembered that these dark days are common to high endeavors. Then one must cease to think of results, think only of the joy of the work, and push on.

November 27, 1919. — The world outside is in a state of violent unrest. Amid the turmoil I, too, am spiritually tossed about. I have tried so often these days to continue in my beloved work but I cannot. In order to write there must be quiet, security, peace. Today in the United States there is none of these. The individual is nothing. He cannot say, "I will stand apart. I will live my life." Our individuality is buffeted and swallowed up in the general torrent. It has been a lesson to me of the oneness of all things. We rise and fall together. We cannot dream of peace and beauty while the ground under us trembles.

For himself he wrote these lines and for years kept them on his desk: "Keep interested in your own career. See in the future some progress, however little. Know that to begin cheerfully again, when you have failed, is itself a great success. Maintain the respect of them that meet you day by day through sincerity, not servility. Condemn conditions rather than men. Believe and say some good of life. And though you lash injustice with bitter words, be still sweet at heart. Here is a battlefield for the courage of a hero."

For any artist a background of quiet and peace is essential. In those years Epictetus and Montaigne became his lifelong companions and the *Journal of Amiel* was to him a great solace

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for Amiel also, confronted with earning a living and doing his writing, had endeavored to work out some constructive philosophy by which to live and solve his problems. Always Max Ehrmann was studying, planning and saving his money in order to free himself for his own work.

Yet he had already made a contribution. His *Breaking Home Ties* had sold well; *A Prayer* had become famous. From his book of Poems *A Mother Rocking Her Child, I Went into a Magnificent Church, Mother, My Native City* and others were widely reproduced. In spite of the hardships of these early years, he realized their worth in having given him solid ground for his writing. He knew at first hand some of the injustices and cruelties of life. Also out of the environment of law, factory, and business came two American classics: the scholarly, dramatic production, *Jesus: A Passion Play*, and the beautiful drama, *The Wife of Marobius*.

During these years Max Ehrmann and Eugene Debs saw much of each other. Always interested in political and social questions, Max Ehrmann was naturally deeply interested in Debs' crusade for socialism. They had many discussions on the social injustices of the times. On the two occasions when Debs ran for President Max Ehrmann voted for him, not because he wanted Debs for president but to support the protest vote.

Debs often related to Max Ehrmann many memories of his youth. Once when a small boy, his mother told him he was too big to play marbles. In secret grief he buried them in the back yard and never would tell where they were. He told of the sad day when, although feeling keenly the "need to know more," he left school in the grades in order to help with the family income. Later when he read in the paper of the graduation of his class from high school, he secretly wept. He told of his first job, washing grease from trucks at fifty cents a day, and how, on receiving his first pay of \$4.00 for eight days



work, he ran home and triumphantly gave it to his mother. He told of the hardships and accidents of railroad life and that his mother, worrying about him, sat up every night until he came home. When he was nineteen years old, realizing again the need of more education and after long saving, he bought himself an encyclopedia which he sat up nights to read after his return from his railroad work. Frequently in these talks Debs recited to Max Ehrmann long passages from Schiller and Goethe in German. In later years, again and again he paid tribute to his wife, Katherine, saying, "She is a woman of magnificent mind and character." He told how in all his years of turmoil she and his brother Theodore had understood him and were loyal to him.

March 10, 1933. — Virginal personalities, that is, persons of intelligence unspoiled by "education" such as Debs, are likely to have a naïve attitude toward life; and if they have energy, they are more likely to be forward-looking than the so-called educated. Education is largely the acquisition of the accumulated prejudices of man's past — often a serious handicap for the influencing of man's future. I did not hear the word "socialism" at college until all the world outside was roaring it into the ears of the professors. It was Eugene Debs, not the professors, who first instructed the people of our nation in the principles of socialism.

When Debs was away on his lecture tours he wrote many letters to the young author, always warm and generous in praise and encouragement. From their correspondence over thirty letters from Debs remain. In one of these letters he wrote: "Only the soul gifted with poetic insight, understanding and delicate sensibilities could have written such a beautiful message."

In an article about Debs in 1916 in the *Appeal to Reason* Max Ehrmann wrote:



"All my life I have lived not far from Debs' home. Aside from knowing him as a man who has theories about government, I know him as neighbor and friend. He is almost the finest-grained man I know. In his home and neighborhood he is held in tender regard, in spite of the fact that few agree with his political doctrines. His wife is a beautiful, big-hearted woman and the relations between them are such as would put to shame many critics of his private life. He is generous almost to the point of folly. He works too much without pay and gives away too much of what he earns. That one dark suit of clothes he has worn from the beginning of time. But that tall figure with bent shoulders is a lover of men; with his tender heart and strong will he is an advocate of comfort for all who work. This man is loved here where we have known him."

And in 1918, in *Pearson's Magazine*, Max Ehrmann wrote again in an article about Debs:

"Debs has been the traveling college professor of the masses, their provoker, their lecturer on economics. Had his audience been the scholars he might have spoken in a quiet voice. But with great eloquence he aroused from slumber the tired, mentally sluggish workers of this country. He popularized the doctrines of socialism. For this he has paid dearly for he has known poverty, slander and the prison cell. He charged nothing for hundreds of his lectures. With one-fourth of the outlay of nervous energy, Debs might have been a successful business man or with his gift for words he might have been elected to the Senate. In his inner life he is all love and peace. Yet from the lecture platform he hurls bitterness and hatred at injustice and cruelty. The generation that heard him speak will transmit a tradition of his stormy life."

Upon two occasions I was a guest with Max Ehrmann at the Debs' home where some visiting celebrity was being enter-



tained. It was my introduction to socialism. The conversation was exciting and brisk and Mrs. Debs an admirable hostess. Some years later when Mrs. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, well known author, gave a lecture in Terre Haute she was a guest at my home. As she was eager to meet Eugene Debs I asked him to call. The conversation from their different points of view was lively, exhilarating, and at times startling, for they could agree on little. Max Ehrmann had to interrupt frequently to calm their bristling arguments and aroused spirits.

But these years of friendship were broken by World War I when Debs came out "a flaming revolutionist." Max Ehrmann was shocked, and there was a parting of the ways. The story is in the Journal.

December 18, 1930. — I felt the pain of disillusion when the great-heart Debs, my friend, after preaching love and brotherhood for thirty years, suddenly attempted to provoke a revolution. Revolution! Here in a land having universal suffrage! I remember, also, how in my youth I tossed that word "revolution" about. But I never advocated it. I feared it, as I still fear it.

April 19, 1919. — I am thinking of Debs in prison in Moundsville, West Virginia. This is his first week there. In his exaltation of spirit, even to the gates of the prison, he defied the whole United States, saying, "I enter here a flaming revolutionist." With what fondness I have heard him in private conversation speak of Lovejoy, Phillips, Garrison and John Brown. Debs says, "These men were revolutionists in their time. I am a revolutionist in my time." He knows posterity will do him justice. He knows he will sit beside the great in history. Though one day he will be laid in the earth, he knows that his spirit will haunt men's thoughts long after. Here is a game in the playing of which there is excitement to charm only dare-devil spirits. But the prize, the spiritual elevation, is proportionate to the hazard. Here is spiritual mountain climbing.



No man was ever less concerned about going to prison than Debs. He was warned by friends and by the government. Once I labored two hours with him. In his speeches he taunted the government, dared it and defied it. The play of his life is now at the climax. He awaits the denouement. He has listened to his inner voice knowing its promise of a noble and heroic tradition.

To me his conduct has a different aspect. For twenty years, by word of tongue or pen, I have been telling the people that Debs is not a revolutionist. How mistaken I was! What a mystery, how so charming a personality, so really lovable in his private life, would have us all at each other's throats, to accomplish what? — the brotherhood of man! Could anything be more incredible?

November 29, 1918. — A few steps from where I shall lie in my last sleep, Eugene Debs will rest when his course is run. I had hoped that future generations, visiting his grave, might say, "Here lies the great agitator, the great lover of men," and then taking but a few steps might add, "and here lies the poet who never tired of praising him." But this can never be. He has opposed the war against Germany. He also has advocated here a revolution by violence! Our ways have parted.

December 4, 1932. — The philosophical period, the dawn period of historic movements, is frequently delightful to intellectuals at least. There is hope, enthusiasm, expansion of spirit. At last immemorial wrongs are to be righted. I remember the socialism under Eugene Debs — the grandiose feeling that now at last mankind is to be freed of its ancient bondage. Theory may promise much as long as it is well-behaved, but practice must "deliver the goods." The communist, educational period in the United States is now at the beginning. It will be well under way when it is fashionable to discuss pleasantly communist principles on the golf course and at dinner parties. Hopeful



theory often warms the heart, which later is frozen by terrifying reality. In our democracy there should be no need of the reign of blood and iron. When the people gain more wisdom they may evolve some cooperative distribution under competent management. It is a matter of education. Meanwhile, will the possessors of enormous fortunes still keep the people dispossessed? . . . I am anxious.

August 12, 1935. — Some form of socialism is coming and may be a step on the way to the dream of idealists. When collectivism goes too far it will swing back a little. Never again will *laissez faire* capitalism rule. Yet how futile is prophecy. The World War was fought for the principles of democracy and ended in dictatorships. What irony! And yet it pointed the way to economic democracy which is the next step. In all this Debs played a large part.

Max Ehrmann was horrified and overwhelmed by the tragedy of World War I. "This war has outraged the human spirit," he wrote, "and the savage forces of mankind now unleashed by the German military clique must be crushed." He served through the war on the Registration Board and wrote many articles and poems that were widely reprinted in the press of the country. Among these outstanding poems were *Who First Draw Sword*; *Germans, O Germans*; *The Kaiser*, a denunciation of the military and social system inflicted on the German people, and which could have been controlled by the mad Kaiser; *Consolation in War Time*, that in spite of the horrors of war America was doing only what was right; *Wake Up, My Countrymen!* a warning to the American people of the import of a possible German victory; and *Peace Shall Live*, reprinted in the *League of Nations Herald* in Geneva.

Through these crowded years Max Ehrmann had been aware of the growing importance of the novelist, Theodore Dreiser,



who had lived in Terre Haute. There was some correspondence between them on various matters, and throughout the Journal there are several criticisms and appreciations of this famous writer.

May 1, 1932.—I often think of Dreiser persisting in an ideal of his art through thirty years of poverty, "weather-beaten and solitary" as Mencken described. A flood of gold and the camera came to him at last. Then he did another bold thing: he declared for communism in a country hating it.

June 6, 1932.—Dreiser's fifty years of abject poverty were relieved finally by *An American Tragedy*. Unlike Stevenson he had no kind father to send him twelve hundred dollars a year at critical moments. Dreiser has neither charm of style nor devotion to persons, though he is capable of devotion to a cause as in *Tragic America*. His great virtue—gaunt, elephantine virtue!—is devotion to truth about external facts. The facts of the inner life: the whole background of aspirations, exaltations, experience and scholarship unified into a knowing, reposeful personality—to these he is a stranger. I cannot conceive any personal devotion to Dreiser. By appointment, we spent a few days together in Washington, where he gave me some material on his brother Paul of whose life I afterward wrote a sketch. He seemed ill, parched, neurotic, by turns timid and arrogant—a pitiable figure. At that time he was writing *An American Tragedy*, and was still living in poverty. Dreiser's virtue is his steady eye upon external facts. Dreiser has done a great work; and through years of lunch counters and alley living rooms, he has stood steadfastly by it . . . Enough! Let me be thankful to this author for what he does and not condemn him for what he does not . . . He rendered service in freeing the main current of our literature from a silly romanticism and prudery. This particular trail often before has been taken in Europe; but



he with Upton Sinclair and Sinclair Lewis blazed it here in the United States. His special fault is lack of taste. Debs, a greater iconoclast, had delicate taste and ingratiating manners.

During these busy years Max Ehrmann was still giving readings and talks through the mid-west. Among them he liked to remember "Authors Week" in St. Louis where he gave a talk and was paid a tribute for his poetry by William Marion Reedy. "Mr. Ehrmann was greeted by a brilliant audience which heard his scholarly exposition of literary trends with pleasure and interest."<sup>1</sup> In 1920 a monument over the grave of Sarah Lincoln Grigsby, sister of Abraham Lincoln, was dedicated in Pigeon Creek Cemetery, Lincoln City, Indiana. Max Ehrmann read a poem, "Sarah Lincoln," which he had been asked to write for the occasion. At a banquet of Indiana librarians he was the speaker, having for his subject "The Malady of Romanticism," a "disease in art which refuses to recognize the laws of life." He pleaded for a literary salon that might offset the "Best Sellers" and cultivate some standards of taste.

November 11, 1920. — Last evening I spoke at the banquet of the Indiana Librarians in the Severin Hotel. The music, the flowers, the lights, the large dining-room full of cheerful faces filled me with something of the old thrill. I spoke on the "Malady of Romanticism" and made a popular plea for the doctrine of *The New Laocoön* commingled with some of my own admixture of theory. I spoke well and there was much applause.

His short play, *The Bank Robbery*, has been produced over the country many times. This humorous take-off on modern labor conditions was presented in Indianapolis at the Murat Theatre by The Little Theatre Company. "It played to a full

<sup>1</sup> *St. Louis Post Dispatch*.



house, the audience made its pleasure over the humor of the piece very audible and gave the author a hearty greeting when he appeared in response to applause."<sup>1</sup>

March 28, 1920. — Last night in Indianapolis, I saw produced my play, *The Bank Robbery*, a farce with some moral hits upon industrial conditions. In response to applause I made a few remarks. I have been pondering it. An epilogue of God to the Human Drama is what the world has everywhere and always craved, hoped and prayed for . . . Since we have so long vainly tried to interpret the play, surely the gods owe us some answer.

March 6, 1919. — The Angelus is ringing from the tower of St. Joseph's church, a block away. How many years I have heard this bell mark the evening hour. It is a sweet sound, though I have nothing in common with Catholic theology — no, nor Protestant nor Jewish theology! Yet this same Catholic theology has turned out some good products in the way of character. I have known many of these industrious, honest folks that go to St. Joseph's church.

The bell has stopped ringing. My remembrance goes back more than thirty years, when I heard it regularly. A prince of men, Father McEvoy, was then the priest there. Handsome, with elegant manners, bubbling cheer, a great love of his fellow creatures both in and outside of his church, he impressed me tremendously. For more than thirty years the music of this bell has been pleasing to me. On the road of life, where there is so much darkness and so little light, I can understand the comfort of the faith that this bell symbolizes. Ring on, sweet Angelus! To me also you have a meaning, a kind of peace, hope, even faith. You arouse in me my own ponderings on the great enigma.

Out of these years came his poems in *The Crowded World*.

<sup>1</sup> *Indianapolis Star*.



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"Who seeketh gold and the plaudits of men will find them in me, but who seeketh the things of the spirit will not find them in me." Under the glittering surfaces of American prosperity, he saw what our commercial civilization does to the spiritual life of man.

June 24, 1924. — There came a time in my life when I no longer had to run feverishly after dollars. I engaged myself only of my own choice, and kept my wants simple, which gave me the opportunity to write what I felt I should write regardless of consequences. There can be little pursuit of beauty and truth when the writer has his eye on the public.

The Journal of Max Ehrmann is full of memories of these years. At last, after diverse experiences in the courts, in law and in the business world, he decided to devote all his time to his writing. In an interview he said: "At DePauw I contracted a disease which I have never shaken off. The disease was Idealism. I took it to Harvard with me where I studied philosophy. Because of it I did the thing in life I wanted to do — Writing."

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## Chapter 4

### HIS WRITINGS

*I would reclaim a little of the heart of man, infuse some gentleness into the stern ethics of trade, and make life the supreme art instead of acquisition. If, in an hour of noble elation, I could write a bit of glorified prose that would soften the stern ways of life, and bring to our fevered days some courage, dignity and poise — I should be well content.*

— JOURNAL

An appreciation of Max Ehrmann and his writings in the *Indiana Magazine of History*, 1942, gave the following evaluation: "Much of Max Ehrmann's prose is clothed in sonorous words and moves with such a melodious cadence that it is more truly poetry than rhyming syllables could have made it. A master of the English language, he is unusually successful in the difficult allegorical and parable form of literature. Ehrmann's poems are vivid and impassioned. They belong to the new school of verse and to the classics. One cannot help but feel the charm of the mind that created them. Ehrmann is a master craftsman, and originality is the most notable feature of his work. He has struck out fearlessly for himself into untried paths. His writings show a rare insight into human nature. Everywhere he cries out against greed, hypocrisy and artificiality. A crusader for social welfare and human rights, he is fearless and relentless in his demands for social and moral reform. Disillusionment has not made him cynical or skeptical but it has deepened his love for humanity, and strengthened his de-



sire to better the lot of his fellow Americans. His poems radiate passion and sympathy for mankind."<sup>1</sup>

Many years of living, struggles to earn a livelihood, bitterness of soul in witnessing the sordid drama of social injustices and sordid men and women in the city courts, wars and depressions, also years of calm meditation and writing took place between this recent appreciation of the work of Max Ehrmann and the early years of his literary efforts. Always a student, his interest in writing began in college days as editor of the *DePauw Weekly* and at Harvard as editor of the *Rainbow*. While in Harvard two books were published: *A Farrago*, a collection of stories and articles on student life at Harvard which had previously appeared in Boston newspapers, and *The Mystery of Madeline Le Blanc*, a story of the French Revolution of 1830. In 1901 his play, *The Animals*, about Harvard students, was given one performance in Terre Haute by a stock company, but it was a failure. Also in 1901 *A Fearsome Riddle* was published—the experiments of a scientist computing the length of one's existence with mathematical accuracy. It was advertised as "a novel explanation of Determinism." None of these books was of any special merit or success but, as in many other first books, an author was trying to find himself.

In a recent life of Eugene Debs there is an interesting story of these early efforts: "Debs felt a personal obligation to encourage writers with a humanitarian outlook. He warmly praised dozens of journalists and poets; he unofficially sponsored several men of letters. One of these was the young Terre Haute poet and philosopher, Max Ehrmann. Thinking that Ehrmann's work expressed the idealism of the Socialist cause, Debs once sent a sample to Edwin Markham. He hoped that Markham would encourage the Terre Haute author. Within a few days the package was returned, unopened. Markham said he was too

<sup>1</sup> O. L. Bockstahler, Indiana University.

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busy to bother with it. Debs was furious and wrote a reproachful letter to the famous poet. Successful men, Debs said, had an obligation to their younger colleagues. The condemnation was so unqualified that Markham reconsidered his previous decision."<sup>1</sup>

So Markham wrote Max Ehrmann a friendly letter. A few years later when *A Prayer*<sup>2</sup> brought him genuine popular recognition, Markham again wrote him: "The *Prayer* has simplicity, majesty, tenderness. The words are worthy to be engraved on granite." Still later in an article Markham wrote: "Anything that Max Ehrmann writes has this tender minor key that marks the artist in words and the poet in feeling." In 1936 Markham sent him autographed copies of *The Man With the Hoe* and *Lincoln, The Man of the People*. Inscribed on them are the words: "For my comrade in the world of American Poetry. He is an honor to our House of Song."

In the St. Louis World's Fair a beautiful hand-illuminated copy of the *Prayer* hung in the Indiana building beside a Riley manuscript, *The Frost is on the Pumpkin*. Hundreds of people read it and many copied it. One day the *Prayer* was missing and the fact that someone would steal a prayer gave it publicity in all the papers of the country. In 1908 Judge Crane of the Court of Special Sessions in Chicago gave a copy to every person convicted in his court. In 1909 the *Prayer* was recited on the floor of Congress. *A Prayer* has been translated into many foreign languages; in Arabic it was read by a native preacher at a church service in Malaya.

Another well-known work, *Desiderata*, was written in 1927; it is a creed for wise living.

January 1, 1936. — I carried this bit of prose in my pocket

<sup>1</sup> *The Bending Cross* by Ray Ginger. University of Rutgers Press, 1949.

<sup>2</sup> Dodge Publishing Co., N.Y., 1903.



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for many months. I wrote it for myself. The virtues it counsels I was in need of.

A reviewer commented: "*Desiderata* stands at the very head of devotional literature. In these two writings Max Ehrmann brings to us his own inspiring contacts with beauty, serenity, and peace." During the last war, Dr. Merrill Moore, well known psychiatrist of the Harvard Medical School, was located in the Pacific area. In a letter to Max Ehrmann he wrote: "I think you should know that nearly every day of my life I use your very fine prose poem, *Desiderata*, in my work. Here I have found your philosophy useful and have used it considerably as part of the psychotherapy I am doing. Besides being inspirational, *Desiderata* is beautiful and reassuring. I must have given away a thousand copies in the last few years."

The long narrative poem, *Breaking Home Ties*,<sup>1</sup> was inspired by the well-known painting of this name by Hovenden.<sup>2</sup> Here is a family group saying farewell to the son leaving for the city to start out in life. The mother tells of an ideal world in which success is won through work and love. But the father speaks of the real world in which the boy will find both joy and sorrow; that true success cannot be found in any struggle for money or place or power but in love for his fellow men and that his greatest blessing would be found in his work. The Outlook observed: "Here is a surprising wealth of distilled wisdom. The human interest stands out in thrilling relief."

Three editions of *The Poems of Max Ehrmann*<sup>3</sup> have been published and widely reviewed. Written out of his own need,

<sup>1</sup> Dodge Publishing Co., N.Y., 1904.

<sup>2</sup> Philadelphia Museum of Art.

<sup>3</sup> Viquesney Publishing Co., Terre Haute, Ind., 1906.

Dodge Publishing Co., N.Y., 1910.

Bruce Humphries, Inc., Boston, 1948.

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his poems are completely related to the doubts, longings, and confusions of our own times. Many of the earlier poems were in Whitmanesque style; yet, "Max Ehrmann is stronger and more sensible than Whitman, finer grained and higher in purpose."<sup>1</sup> Thomas Wentworth Higginson, whom he had known in Harvard days, wrote him: "It is always interesting to us oldsters in Cambridge to find that we have ever been objects of interest or even of notice to the students who swirl by in such numbers seeming utterly absorbed in their own affairs. The world belongs to them, not to their elders. I find novelty and interest in your poems. They are strong sermons and ought to live." *The Caxton Magazine* commented on them: "Max Ehrmann has come to be recognized as a poet whose productions strike a universal response to human needs. Because he lived and struggled and wrote, he has helped others to live and struggle and toil. The ideals in Ehrmann's helpful poems have answered world needs. If his poems are read in the light of an ethical viewpoint they will be better understood for here one finds the selfish, grinding world realistically pictured and also the vision of a greater destiny for men."

Of his last volume of *Poems* Dr. Merrill Moore again said: "Max Ehrmann stands unique in the field of American Literature. His *Desiderata* crystallizes the knowledge gained through centuries of experience by the human race and expresses it so beautifully and memorably that one can never forget it. His poems have warmth and grace and charm and human understanding. He was a man of this century who understood his relation to it and at the same time incorporated the best of the past." Stanley Hornbeck, diplomat and publicist, wrote in a letter: "What a fine philosophy he had! And wonderfully well expressed. The portrait is that of a strong man; the words are

<sup>1</sup> *Brooklyn Eagle*.



those of an earnest, gentle, outreaching, and out-giving soul. In them and by them he lives on." Professor Frank Davidson of Indiana University, reviewing the *Poems*, wrote: "There is wisdom in this book — wisdom garnered from a lifetime of sensitive response to a variety of experiences — wisdom characteristic of a high prudence that has learned to evaluate the physical and the ideal, doubt and faith, matter and spirit. The chief themes are the tranquilizing serenity and beauty of the outdoors, the charm and depth and promise of love, social injustice, the tragic aspects of war, the worth of the ideal, even when it seems fated for disillusionment, and the value of faith and spirit."<sup>1</sup>

"The real life of an individual lies hidden in the soul, in purposes and ideals, and these the camera cannot photograph nor the dramatist penetrate," says the *Journal*. Yet, "in understanding the lives of men and women and in his deep insight into the human heart, Max Ehrmann has won a notable place among American writers. His style is that of the cultured man of letters and his work has a freshness and originality of thought that only a well-rounded student of literature can produce. His *Light of the Sun*<sup>2</sup> is a work of tragic intensity and marvelous beauty."<sup>3</sup>

This early drama, *The Light of the Sun*, was at once recognized of merit and produced on the stage several times. Encouraged by this notice, Max Ehrmann wrote *The Wife of Marobius*.<sup>4</sup> In an interview he said: "Of all my books I believe this work to be most chaste in form. I hammered out these lines as a goldsmith might hammer out a piece of gold. I wanted to give an added radiance to love and tell in enchanted verse

<sup>1</sup> *Indiana Magazine of History*, 1949.

<sup>2</sup> Dodge Publishing Co., N.Y., 1910.

<sup>3</sup> *Buffalo Courier*.

<sup>4</sup> Mitchell Kennerley, N.Y., 1911.

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how much of love is corporeal and how much of the soul; what I thought constituted the ideal of love and the rights of woman to be loved for her own sake."<sup>1</sup>

*The Wife of Marobius* was widely reviewed and letters poured in upon him. "Your pitiless, kind discussion in *The Wife of Marobius*!" wrote his friend, the poet, Arthur Davison Ficke. "Here is the possibility of a generous, frank, complete union of a man and a woman. This is a civilized, fair, trusting and frankly passionate relation between men and women." Havelock Ellis of London wrote him: "I read *The Wife of Marobius* with interest and pleasure and admired the fine, sustained level of the verse which so well expresses the underlying idea." William Faversham, the actor, wrote of it: "How I should love to play it! I picked it up and started to read it and I never stopped. Then I read it over again and in my mind I stage-managed and produced it. Really, it is full of great, great chances."

Claude Bowers, author and now United States ambassador to Chile, wrote him: "With each reading of *The Wife of Marobius* the subtlety, the beauty, and power of it grow upon me. I think it is one of the most beautiful, virile, fascinating closet dramas I have ever read. The imagery and phrasing are not surpassed in the finest passages of Stephen Phillips and the keen insight into feminine psychology is worthy of D'Annunzio. You are one of the few men in present day American Literature to deserve the title of Poet."

"*The Wife of Marobius*," a dramatic critic commented, "is the finest bit of dramatic writing yet produced in America, and Max Ehrmann must be given rank with Ibsen and Maeterlinck as psychologist, prophet and playwright of the new ideals. Here is pure literature, poetry exquisite, recalling the first days of the

<sup>1</sup> *Indianapolis Star*.



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English drama; passion superb; a setting sensuous and colorful, conveying a moral the most modern, advanced, heroic, yet true for the womanhood of all time. This play is so perfectly constructed that it rises like a Greek temple. It is not an ascetic revolution against passion but a demand that the soul be given its due rank in the expression of love."<sup>1</sup>

Another appreciative reviewer declared: "*The Wife of Marobius* treats with great beauty the theme of the wife who loves beauty of soul and the husband who loves beauty of body. It is a drama of psychology and sex finely done, a play that has received more deserved admiration in England than here at home. It is strange that this exquisitely chiseled play has never been produced. Three qualities are marked in this drama—a fine and sure sense of technique, a subtle understanding of the feminine mind, and a noble feeling for beauty at once sensuous and moral. The scene is laid in pre-Christian days in Rome and one is carried back to that period as completely as he is in the dramatization Mr. Ehrmann later made of the story of Christ."<sup>2</sup>

But it was *Jesus: A Passion Play*<sup>3</sup> that placed Max Ehrmann among the foremost writers of drama of America and England. Artists, educators, authors and even clergymen praised this drama. All his days and for four years in college he had heard Christianity expounded. For twenty years he had read and studied all available literature and authorities on the life of Jesus. Yet after the book appeared some one asked him if he had read the Bible. Said the Outlook: "If this book is read in the spirit in which it is written, it will help the reader to make real to his imagination the story which too often seems unreal."

Often through the years Max Ehrmann said to me because

<sup>1</sup> Lloyd in *The New Review*, 1913.

<sup>2</sup> *The Drama Magazine*, 1917.

<sup>3</sup> The Baker and Taylor Co. New York, 1915.

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he felt it so deeply: "In time the world will learn to distinguish between Jesus as God and Jesus as philosopher. He may be the greatest philosopher the world has known and as such I revere him. Many of his teachings are the greatest need and ideal of mankind and as such they never can be surpassed."

December 25, 1918. — I have been thinking of Jesus today because I am coming to see more clearly what a wonderful effect the teachings of this lonely philosopher have had upon the history of the world. Today I celebrate his memory as a philosopher whose tradition has popularized the teachings of love, brotherhood and service. As he recedes into the shadow as a god, he advances into the sunlight as a philosopher. Some of his ethical teachings are still remaking the world into something ever nobler. Therefore, I too, celebrate his memory even as the bearer of "glad tidings."

April 20, 1918. — Today is Easter. The day is now significant as a festival of Spring. Thus fades away the metaphysical Jesus of the immaculate conception, of the miracles and of the resurrection. But I believe the Jesus of the ethics of the Sermon on the Mount is destined to live on. Upon this basis the scores of different denominations — and indeed almost all religions — may one day unite, to fight the battle of the brotherhood of man against the forces of reaction. This Jesus very literally came out of the tomb.

"If your play were written by a Russian or German," Arthur Davison Ficke again wrote him, "it would be hailed in America as a masterpiece and a revelation." Bliss Perry wrote: "I read it with a keen appreciation of its technical workmanship and high poetic value." Maurice Browne of the Chicago Little Theatre wrote him: "How much your play interests me. Several of the scenes give me extraordinary pleasure, particularly the opening



scene between the servants. The scene in the Garden of Gethsemane between the disciples is pure Fra Angelico, and altogether beautiful. The thing as a whole seems to me to be a contribution to American dramatic literature of extreme importance and I congratulate you most warmly on your achievement." Jack London, that lover of realism, wrote him with enthusiasm: "More than anything else, what I like about it is its unrelenting reality and brass tacksism. From beginning to end it is real. It is what surely might have happened."

"In this drama," one critic reviewed, "the personages are stripped of supernatural elements, and are represented as simple, ardent, real orientals, in the throes of a great and impending tragedy. It is full of noise, movement, and excitement. The author seeks to portray in intense, dramatic form what probably happened to Jesus the last three days of his life. Mr. Ehrmann has rationalized and humanized the ending of the Jesus story. It is a big piece of work with the true color and simplicity of the beginnings of Christianity."<sup>1</sup> Another critic commented: "There is a fine imagination running through this play. As an interpretation, quite as much as a piece of dramatic literature, this play is of high worth. It brings the life of Jesus within the comprehension of the matter-of-fact man as well as the mystic."<sup>2</sup>

"This work is valuable in that it gives a highly graphic picture of conditions in Jerusalem during the last days of Jesus' life," wrote another reviewer. "The commercial practices, the jealous relationship between Jewish and Roman authorities, the transactions of the traders and financiers, the effects of Christ's teachings in an age when few dissented from the predatory

<sup>1</sup> The *Philadelphia North American*.

<sup>2</sup> The *Boston Herald*.

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practices of the influential — these matters are a startling revelation. The picture of Jesus is amazingly clear and tragic."<sup>1</sup>

The drama, *David and Bathsheba*,<sup>2</sup> has a remarkable setting and the plot offers opportunity for dramatic action true to the Biblical account. The ten wives of David play a considerable and often humorous part. Here is a genuine and intense struggle between love and passion and conscience, and the play has a moral keenly pointed. The *Drama Magazine* also reviewed it: "The finest achievement of Max Ehrmann up to the present is his play, *David and Bathsheba*. In this he has, as in *Jesus: A Passion Play* written in the spirit and vernacular of the time, and the result is a lyric play almost as lovely as its inspiration. The language is not an archaic imitation but a living speech, breathing the spirit of Hebraic days in all its vivid, oriental beauty, yet never losing the flexibility of real speech, varied from character to character, and maintaining at the same time the beauty of imagery and diction. Mr. Ehrmann is a rare combination of high moral purpose, sound health and great sensitivity to sensuous beauty. In *David and Bathsheba* this alignment finds peculiarly harmonious material. The result is a drama of technique remarkable in poetic or oriental drama, which, in spite of the cumbersome associations of its story, contains the humor and tragedy of life and produces a single impression of ever mounting passion and power. Throughout the retelling of this old story he has portrayed the people with a vividness unusual in drama, and with a remarkably emotional as well as intellectual understanding of the period."

One more important play, *Eternal Male and Female* or *Tamar*, was only recently published in his book, *The Wife of Marobius and Other Plays*.<sup>3</sup> The plot is compact and thrilling;

<sup>1</sup> *The St. Louis Republic*.

<sup>2</sup> *The Drama Magazine*, 1917.

<sup>3</sup> Bruce Humphries, Inc., Boston, 1950.



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the style is marked by sincerity and dignity. Here Tamar and Amnon fight out in brittle, almost barbaric manner, the eternal battle between men and women on their part in the love life. All of these shorter plays deal with the love rights of men and women and have been called a distinct contribution to American dramatic Literature.

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Several interesting booklets by Max Ehrmann were published during these years. *Be Quiet, I'm Talking*<sup>1</sup> is in the form of conversations with various persons who visited his studio. They discuss religion, literature, sex, science, etc. *Love From Many Angles*<sup>2</sup> contains observations on this always absorbing subject in a sincere and sympathetic manner. These booklets are entertaining and contain much sensible and provocative philosophy.

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In all his verse and prose Max Ehrmann demonstrated his love for his country. Therefore he was interested in all forward movements and championed many reforms. In 1937 a broadcast from Indiana University about his life and writings said: "Max Ehrmann in daily life is a modest, unassuming philosopher. He foretold the end of the period of romanticism during World War I and then he found that realism produced even greater maladies. He rebels against narrow, hide-bound creeds and 'conventions that are but the husks of virtue.' He is at all times frank and natural; his mind is attuned to 'the silent language of God's universe.' His feet on the ground and his head among the constellations, he could not have lived or written other than as an advocate of human rights and happiness. Mr. Ehrmann has always given generously of his talents to the advancement of naional social reforms."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Indiana Publishing Co., Terre Haute, Ind., 1926.  
<sup>2</sup> Haldeman-Julius Publications.  
<sup>3</sup> Ross Lockridge, Indiana University Library Museum.



## THIS HIGH RESOLVE

I often sit alone at night and read  
Our Country's history, and note how few  
Have been the times she has not tried to do  
Some justice to the people's common need,  
Proclaiming ever nobler public creed,  
Enacting moral insight ever new.  
Yet often backward she has been, 'tis true,  
To smite the mob or smite the palm of greed.  
Still other fevers must our land endure.  
But in her basic law is written clear  
The means—Democracy—her ills to cure.  
My Countrymen, this high resolve hold dear:  
No revolutionists, however sure  
In subtle sophistry, are needed here.<sup>1</sup>

During the Second World War, his outstanding poems widely published were: *England*—1940, *One Flaming Judgment*—1943, *War*—1940, *Crisis*, and *United Nations*. Interested in the struggle for Woman Suffrage he wrote much for the cause, his *Complacent Women*—1918 being widely circulated. All of these poems are as applicable to problems of today as when written. Four letters from Margaret Sanger testified to his interest in the Birth Control movement. "Thank you for your assistance and interest in this great cause," she wrote. And in his Journal he said:

"October 21, 1918.—I have received a beautiful letter from Margaret Sanger. This letter, so simple and appreciative, has moved me very much. I count this woman as one posterity will remember. Her LIFE will make good reading twenty years hence. She has stood erect through imprisonment. The public is now coming to her rapidly.

Not for sensation but with the definite moral purpose of

<sup>1</sup> *The Poems of Max Ehrmann*, Bruce Humphries, Inc., Boston, 1948.



arousing public interest in the future of the race, Max Ehrmann wrote a series of pamphlets on the menace of the social diseases and juvenile delinquency. From his experiences in his official capacity as deputy prosecuting attorney, he had investigated many cases and through the years read all available literature on the subject. The pamphlets contained appalling statistics and facts which became a part of the literature on the subject. Many extracts from these booklets and an article on Juvenile Delinquency were used in the United States Health Department Magazine, Social Pathology. Impressed with the importance of these pamphlets, Upton Sinclair wrote him: "These books are honest and straightforward and they are written by a man who has a grasp of literature and a power of expression. I am surprised that I know so little about you and I would like to know more."

One of the famous books of world literature is *Ecclesiasticus*, the *Wisdom of Jesus, Son of Sirach*, found in the Apocrypha. From this book, which he considered one of the wisest ever written, Max Ehrmann produced *Worldly Wisdom*.<sup>1</sup> The poetic form is like that of the Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam which advises the epicurean philosophy, while *Worldly Wisdom* gives most practical advice as to how to live. The introduction says: "*The Book of Ecclesiasticus, The Wisdom of Jesus, Son of Sirach*, over two thousand years old, contains the rules of successful, practical living as if it had been written today. Who was its author, Jesus, the Son of Sirach? No one knows, yet he understood how to play the game of life. For a few hundred years this book was a part of the Christian canon. Each nation, religion, and age interpolated it for its own purposes. Mr. Ehrmann has extracted many of the wisdom passages and turned them into verse. In doing this some of the wisdom of Ehrmann

<sup>1</sup> Haldeman-Julius Publications, 1934.

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has crept into the poem. Yet he has remarkably kept faith with the thought and language of the Son of Sirach. *Worldly Wisdom* deals little with metaphysical problems. Here is a world, a fairly acceptable one, and Jesus, the Son of Sirach, tells us how to get the most out of it. The Son of Sirach does not sit in an ivory tower. He was on the street and copied life. He evidently lived to a great age and tasted all the fruits of life. I do not know where else may be found such *Worldly Wisdom*. The book is as pat today as it was two thousand years ago and Max Ehrmann has succeeded admirably in imprisoning it within these verses."<sup>1</sup>

Like his *Poems*, the *Journal of Max Ehrmann* is his spiritual autobiography. Here is a picture of a thinking man contemplating his civilization. From the turmoil of the outside world he fled to the solitude of his study and the refuge of his beloved journal. Here he tried to understand the world around him and find some solace for the pain of modern existence. In his own words the journal is a record of "an endeavor to live humanistically in a world of turmoil and, what thinking persons experience, the search for repose." Here also he discloses the wide background of his scholarship and thinking. Not yet published, the journal may prove an important contribution. In this journal he gives the following evaluation of his own writing:

Journal — Today I have been thinking of my own work. I have written to the cause of amelioration rather than to the cause of my private purse. I now see that my earlier books were less than nothing. They were but a part of that debris of fiction that tumbles blatantly over the public each spring and autumn. But in *Breaking Home Ties* and in my books of *Poems* there is everywhere a passionate cry against the hardness of life and

<sup>1</sup> Dr. Charles M. Curry, Editor of Literature, American Book Co.



also the visions of better things. In the *Wife of Marobius*, against a wall of brilliant colors and shining jewels, in simple Greek fashion, I told what spiritual ecstasy there might be in the love of a man and a woman. How happy I was when Faversham wrote that he "would love to play it." In *Jesus: A Passion Play* I hoped to save the reputation of a great philosopher from the opprobrium of being an ineffectual, second-rate god. His nineteen hundred years of brotherhood philosophy were not able to prevent the war. He, too, must be weeping in the Sacred Shades. In *David and Bathsheba* there is again the sordid and the ideal love. Without marring the unity, I interwove a strand of humor into this sensu-spiritual, oriental tapestry. In these books there is everywhere the struggle of the real and the ideal, the fact and the vision, the world and the dream, or, as Goethe expressed it in his autobiography, the truth and the poetry. Here is the bitter cry of the prophets of the Old Testament. I, too, believed that God had abandoned the world. But I added the thought that he had abandoned it to be ameliorated by the hand and heart of man.

October 19, 1918. — May I not be ungrateful for the small public that reads and loves my writings. As time goes on, the number may increase. Perhaps even when I am dead, some browser in libraries will come upon me, and, seeing that I was not altogether unworthy, will resurrect me from the dust of things forgotten.

December 24, 1930. — I should like my books to be a testimonial to the livableness of life. But often I have been bitter and discouragement has moved my pen. To be comfortable, to have a daily task, to speak the truth as one sees it, to love, to look upon the beauty of the natural world, to witness the endless strivings of one's friends and neighbors to do well, sometimes to see the sunrise and her gorgeous going down, to

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hear the kindly greeting of a friend, to read a good book, now and then to try one's hand at a kindly deed, to have a little faith that all is well — and all this despite the pessimism of the age — ought there not to be enough here to drive despair from one's soul, to make one a witness to the worth of life? It is Christmas Eve.



## Chapter 5

### THE PROFESSORS

*The greatest gift of all the Human Mind,  
Some consciousness with this our dust entwined.*

—THE GREATEST GIFT

Max Ehrmann delighted in good conversation. His friends and admirers knew they could depend upon his sincerity and friendly words. He liked people and wanted to hear their stories. He listened with sympathy and never ceased to marvel over the heroism of daily life. In informal conversation his courtesy could subtly dispel one's preoccupation with trivial matters. He would not descend in his conversation but gave his listeners something to think about. His mind was a reservoir of thought, wide reading, interesting anecdotes, and delightful humor. He liked to stir up a discussion but would never argue. "Speak your truth quietly and clearly, and listen to others; they too have their story." Yet with his good friends and the professors at the college he could indulge in the pleasant barbs of plain speaking.

The noon lunches with some of the professors of Indiana State Teachers College were always a great pleasure and source of inspiration to him. The professors also looked forward to these informal contacts with much anticipation. These occasions, extending over several years, seemed to them all oases of intellectual refreshment. Here were represented physics, sociology, philosophy, zoology, foreign languages, literature, radio, and



poetry. These various minds, diverse interests and talents produced some interesting and stimulating conversation; and they talked about everything. All these professors are scholars and serious thinkers; all are in contact with the latest and best thinking in their special fields; all are honest in their approach to the subjects discussed.

With his own rich background of education, experience, and thought, as an artist and with his rare conversational powers, Max Ehrmann seemed always ready with the exact word and the right thought that would integrate their ideas and stir up discussion.

Max Ehrmann often recounted to me some of these luncheon conversations and I realized how they stimulated his thought and work. As he said: "We talk the same language; and while we appear to talk about everything else, most of the time we are discussing how each subject contributes to understanding life and finding reality." Several of these professors have kindly given me their impressions of Max Ehrmann — the man, the poet, their friend.<sup>1</sup>

#### WILLIAM P. ALLYN, PROFESSOR OF ZOOLOGY

One of Max Ehrmann's favorite expressions was: "Let us not be grieved about the passing of our good friends; let us be grateful for having had the privilege of knowing and enjoying them while they lived." In a way that beautiful sentiment gives us some comfort. Even though we are forced to sacrifice the earthly association of one of our most cherished friends, his friendship and memories remain like a breath of yesterday, and we are grateful for the opportunity to have known him as he lived.

<sup>1</sup> Dr. Gwylm Isaac, professor of Philosophy and an important member of this group, died in 1946.



Max Ehrmann was intellectually honest. His opinions were never formulated or flavored merely to make them palatable to the listener, or to accomplish some vain self-aggrandisement. He had admirable courage of his convictions. Oftentimes he indulged in almost brutal frankness, even at the expense of intellectual diplomacy. Yet this was done in such a graceful manner that no semblance of rudeness was ever felt.

In spite of this stern intellectual poise, he was broadminded, always tolerant, and exceeding generous in the evaluation of the opinions of others. He was always a good listener and admirably sympathetic with new and different ideas, however humble, even though on the surface these ideas might appear shallow or somewhat impertinent. His earnestness and frankness no doubt often provoked censure from those who found it expedient to deny knowledge of the worldliness, selfishness and greed against which he was an energetic crusader. He believed in the immortality of truth and to this cause he gave a full measure of devotion, especially as it pertains to human conduct.

Max was overwhelmed by the barbarous conduct of mankind. In the bloody conflicts of today, the law of the jungle supercedes the rule of the intellect. Rationalism gives way to irrationalism. The ugly emotions of man are subduing his nobler qualities. Max was perturbed, in a constructive way, about the conduct of man as a fluctuating, unstable institution. To him there was a serious doubt as to whether man was the traditional fallen angel or an apparent ascending beast. The great bulk of evidence, to his sorrow, seemed to justify the latter opinion.

Max Ehrmann was noticeably unorthodox in his views yet he was really deeply religious. He recognized fully the limitations of man and the greatness of the Universe in which he



lived. Repeatedly he has said that one of the most immediate approaches to the great Divine Providence is by way of the science laboratory, the microscope and the telescope,—a study of His handiwork itself at first hand. To him, however, an orthodox God, turning spigots on and off, was, in a sense, infantile. He believed in a religion of living—not dying; he believed that if a man lived right, he would surely die right. His life was a living personification of his philosophical ideals; and his efforts by word or pen were dedicated vigorously to their attainment.

Max Ehrmann was a man rich in soul and mind; yet he was possessed of simplicity, quiet, modest and unassuming. He was an eminent and courageous friend of man in his struggle for a right to live with dignity and to share in the great harvest of the organic necessities of this world. Max Ehrmann was one of the bright stars in the intellectual firmament of his age. Those who love him most are those who knew him best.

#### JOHN ERLE GRINNELL, DEAN

I always felt a sense of keen anticipation when I saw him sitting among my colleagues, his good friends, at one of the tables in the middle of the cafeteria at the Student Union Building. I would hurry to pay the cashier and get my glass of water so that I might be in time to have a chair at his table. There would always be rich talk at that table. The talk would be of ideas, and with him there the air would be singularly free of narrowness and prejudice. All of us knew that Max Ehrmann neither feared nor hated the truth. We know that all of his life he had looked for it with calm eyes and ardent heart. When we talked with him in our midst, he was somehow the pole of moderation round which our whirling thoughts revolved. He was the rock against which our tides of emotionalized opinion broke. If he saw merit in our conclusions, he said so;



if he thought we were unfair or uninformed, he asked questions that swung us toward the truth.

In a world confused and angry and mistrustful, he held steadfastly to his gentle quest for qualities and meanings. His poems are a fresh wind blowing across troubled days. They have gentleness, wisdom and universality. By every definition he was a man of good will. He was the teacher without a classroom. But he always had a class. Whenever he came among us, no matter what our professional degrees or achievements, we became students again. Often he talked little. Sitting quietly, nodding, putting in a question, adding a fact, pulling together ends that appeared loose, he was the master. The years had given him wisdom and calm strength. We who sat with him went back to our classes a little wiser and a little more assured of the goodness of life. I cherish the memory of as wise, gracious, and witty a man as I have ever known.

When the years are gone and have taken with them something we can never have again, we can often see what we only half perceived then. When he walked among us and sat with us in long, memorable conversations, we knew the poet and we recognized the philosopher. Dimly we sensed the noble and great. Only now in the flooding back of our memories do we understand fully that he belonged to the

" . . . souls tempered with fire,  
Fervent, heroic, and good,  
Helpers and friends of mankind."

DR. HARRY V. WANN, DEPARTMENT OF FOREIGN  
LANGUAGES

The writings and life of Max Ehrmann are of interest to all lovers of poetry and lovers of beauty in all forms. In all his writings nearly every line is poetic because it comes from the soul of a poet, a soul keenly attuned to beauty. His prose gives



the illusion of poetry and his poetic vein runs so rich that it pours forth its precious metal in all his utterances, even in his conversation. This depth of poetic feeling coupled with a warm, wholesome philosophy was the result of years of quiet contemplation which gave him his power and insight.

We do Max Ehrmann honor because of what we owe him and in honoring him we reflect honor upon ourselves. He spent his life in Terre Haute because he was happy here and this should be a source of pride to us. He preferred the quiet, contemplative life.

His famous "A Prayer" is a cry of anguish, a voice calling for reassurance in the midst of travail. "Desiderata" reveals the state of serene confidence in a soul that has finally found itself upon solid ground and can henceforth offer a helping hand to weaker souls that have not yet found the way. "Desiderata" offers a perfect reflection of the mind and spirit of Max Ehrmann. The friendliness of the man, his tolerance, his sincerity, self discipline, his adaptability to the changing seasons of life, his respect for the sacred passion of love, his staunch faith in the goodness of life — all are in "Desiderata." He has taught us that Serenity can be achieved through the creation of a haven of refuge, whether an actual physical one or merely a nook of the inner self into which we may at times retire. Had Max Ehrmann written only "A Prayer" and "Desiderata" the world would still be forever in his debt.

I envied Max Ehrmann his calm, philosophic attitude toward the problems that life offers. Not that he was callous or indifferent, for on occasion he could reveal the gravest concern over social injustices and human weaknesses. But he did not allow his righteous indignation to becloud his clear vision. Inflexible in the assertion of his own principles, like Voltaire he championed fiercely the right of others to differ with him. Believing in the right of the humblest creatures to a hearing, he



had found that each man has his story which may be quite interesting if we will but listen to it. Several times when he emerged from the midst of a throng of babbling voices, I have heard his heartfelt sigh of relief. He liked to be with quiet, reflective people and found it difficult to follow his own rule of tolerance when it became necessary to listen to persons who spoke loudly and needlessly.

Max Ehrmann was always good company. He had a matured opinion on almost any subject that he had ever thought about. He preferred, of course, to discuss literature, philosophy, ethics, sociology, art, and music for they were the background of his thinking. But if one touched upon lighter, more frivolous subjects his face would light up like a boy's and he could laugh as heartily as the next one. He was a friendly man. He had a way of greeting you with a sincere smile and a hearty handshake that made you feel he was genuinely glad to see you. His was not the fawning smile of convention. It was the reflection of the inner man who saw something likable in everybody. And intellectual dishonesty he detested. With a few calm, well considered words he could tear the veil from hypocrisy of any sort.

Max Ehrmann did not claim to be a connoisseur of art but his taste in such matters was sound and healthy. While he was sitting for a bust which I recently made of him, he several times assured me that surrealism would soon have had its day and that artists would again seek to depict the beauty always dominant in Nature rather than in the modern, ugly, sordid things of man's making. He suggested that perhaps surrealism was an escape mechanism, the refuge of mediocre artists who did not know how to draw and refused to let real artists enjoy the possession of their talent.

Max Ehrmann did not ostentatiously practice the forms of religion, but his poems, particularly his prayers, attest to his



belief in the goodness of life and his firm confidence in his Maker. Max Ehrmann believed in the power of human love. It is an oft-recurring theme in his poetry and plays. He treated this subject with conviction for he knew that love is the stuff of dreams and yearnings that are universal and timeless. As we know, his own yearnings were realized in a beautiful union of two devoted souls.

Those who spend their lives in the service of humanity, in the consolation of the weary and the heavy laden, and in the acquisition of intellectual treasures, achieve a serenity and a satisfaction which is not the lot of the seeker after things. Of such intellectual and spiritual wealth Max Ehrmann was an example. Our country needs for its own soul's good to cherish her gifted children and to reflect upon what they have done to make the world a little better, a little finer than it would have been without them.

CLARENCE M. MORGAN, PROFESSOR OF SPEECH,  
DIRECTOR OF RADIO

To most of the professors Max Ehrmann talked of philosophy, of the techniques of writing, of problems facing the world but, perhaps, I saw a side of Max's life little known to the other professors who gathered with us at our table in the College Cafeteria. My field is *radio* and my broadcast schedule made it necessary for me to eat my noon lunch a little before the others, stay as long as possible to share their conversations, and then dash away for another broadcast. Max was usually just getting his tray when I stepped in behind him. Thus, I had a chance to be alone with him for a few precious minutes before the others arrived. It was during these frequent brief discussions that Max displayed a deep interest in radio — not concerning its commercial possibilities but the part that radio might



and does play in the thinking of the millions of people who listen daily. He recognized fully the tremendous possibilities of this medium of mass communication. Often we discussed its power if properly utilized in bringing a more complete life to those whose horizons are necessarily limited by conditions beyond their control.

Many were the afternoons when Max would come to the studios to hear, over our direct line, high fidelity equipment programs whose beauty of reproduction was not marred by local interferences of various kinds. On these occasions we enjoyed long talks concerning the influence of radio and its eventual marvellous future. He combined an unusual appreciation of machinery and the mechanical developments in this world of change, with a philosophical understanding of radio's finer potentialities. I feel the loss of our quiet discussions in the radio studio.

JAMES F. MACKELL,  
CHAIRMAN, DEPARTMENT OF SCIENCE

There are a few rare individuals who are so versatile concerning their outlook upon life that they endear themselves to a great variety of people who are engaged in many and varied occupations. Max Ehrmann was one of those individuals. He was interested in human beings and human welfare. His interest was genuine and not merely academic. Those of us who knew him best and who talked with him almost every day learned to appreciate his friendship and his kindly interest in our intimate affairs.

For a man of literary tastes, Max Ehrmann was unique in that he was intensely interested in the natural sciences. The entire field of Nature appeared to him as a great storehouse of useful information from which he felt free to draw material for his poems and essays. As a result of wide interest in all



matters pertaining to nature and man, the conversation and the literary productions of Mr. Ehrmann were replete with references which indicated that the author was unusually well informed.

All of us who knew Max Ehrmann intimately were everlastingly conscious of the fact that he was a gentleman of the old school. His courtesy appealed to all of us. We felt that in Mr. Ehrmann we had a true friend, interested in us, our families, and our daily lives. He was never too busy to take time to congratulate us upon some minor achievement, to ask about the progress of our children in school and to cheer us when we felt low.

Our little group of faculty members at Indiana State Teachers College considered Max Ehrmann as an honorary faculty member. I think he enjoyed meeting with us, perhaps as much as we enjoyed having him in our group. When our meetings came to a conclusion and we all went about our daily duties, I always felt that I had gained something which made my daily chores more meaningful. We miss the physical presence of Max Ehrmann now, but there is something immortal about such a man. I am quite sure that his work will be even more keenly appreciated as the years go by. Our contacts with him have left an indelible mark upon our personalities and our thinking. Our world is a better place to live in because men like Max Ehrmann have passed this way. Our lives have been enriched by his comradeship and good fellowship. I am proud to have been one of his close friends.

V. DEWEY ANNAKIN,  
DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY

It is commonplace that true art is an outgrowth of freedom. What is not so commonly understood or believed is that freedom is grounded in loyalty. Not until one is enslaved by a



great and challenging loyalty is he truly emancipated. Max Ehrmann met this requirement in his life and thus in his work. He was ever loyal to truth and beauty, and under that loyalty he was free.

Max lived in a period in which our civilization began to feel the totalitarian impact of science. I say totalitarian because no phase of our culture has escaped. It was and is a period in which new meanings, new implications and new perspectives have necessitated a re-thinking of basic philosophy and the creation of a new value system. It is not easy to live and work creatively in such a period of transitional values. It is particularly difficult for persons that are sensitive and who have the awareness and imagination required of the artist. In such periods some give up the effort to create and devote themselves solely to understanding. Others give up the attempt to understand and their creative efforts reveal mysticism, or separation from reality, or escape.

Max Ehrmann remained loyal to truth. I never knew anyone to hold so consistently to his ideals. He sought to understand. But he was not content with the understanding that comes by science gone dogmatic. He sought to know by all possible channels of awareness. Often, as a sociologist, I have been amazed at his understanding of social structure and social process. Yet he professed no special knowledge of social science. Often, too, I have been impressed and sometimes inspired by the enthusiasm with which he listened to some theory I had expressed and by his gratitude for my suggestion. That is to say he was neither bound nor repelled by academic discipline. He was free because he was loyal to truth. What he said and wrote had a solid ring because he was not divorced from affairs about him.

One has but to read or recall the simple beauty of his "A Prayer" to be convinced that he was also loyal to beauty. Yet



some of us know that the beauty of his writing was not alone a matter of inspiration. He worked hard at his craft of words. He did not just write, he wrought. The love of beauty compelled him often to write over and over so that the phrase had the right balance, as well as the crystal-clear meaning.

Humility was one of Max Ehrmann's virtues. He was not "vaunted or puffed up." He valued the approbation of his associates but he was fearless when he believed himself right. He was humble in what he asked of life and grateful for what life gave him. Above all Max Ehrmann was deeply and fundamentally religious. Basic in his thinking was the belief that history added up to something, that there was meaning in the years—a design in the tapestry of the ages. Therefore he believed that human life has purpose and infinite possibility. Because of this he had a persistent faith in his fellow human beings although few people could appraise their avarice and cruelty better than he.

How often have I met him on the crowded street—alone amidst the crowd—apparently oblivious to the confusion about him. This was not because he was unaware of his surroundings. It was, I think, because to him the immediate was but a passing phase of the eternal. As someone has written of another, "He seemed frequently to be listening to the ticking of an astronomical clock inaudible to the ordinary ear." One misses him on the streets of our city these days. His appearance on the campus is missed also. The city which he knew and which he loved will wait long to find a more worthy son. "The evening's twilight" found him gentle still.



## Chapter 6

### REFLECTIONS ON A POET'S LIFE

*What various aspirations man pursues!  
It matters not what visions lure,  
Here may ambition all its talent use;  
Here is the world in miniature.*

— TERRE HAUTE

Max Ehrmann had great affection for Terre Haute and chose to spend most of his days in his native city. To him, lover of the quiet life, Terre Haute held the pattern of the larger world and he celebrated it in many of his poems and often in his Journal.

March 26, 1922.—It is raining. I am here in my rooms, surrounded by my books. Around me live acquaintances and friends. It is good to be here on this spot of earth where I was born, where my father and mother lived, labored and were happy. I would that all persons might find such a loved spot on earth. It is a spiritual possession. To belong somewhere, to be known and labor somewhere, to have ties that the years have endeared—these are not the least among the durable satisfactions of life.

September 12, 1922.—In large cities one's views are diffused; here none can escape one's microscope. The histories of many lives I have seen unfold year after year. Here there is romance and heroism—the whole drama of human life. Here



in this smoky, commercial city that has not one bit of bronze or marble for the public eye—yes, even here let me keep my eyes open, my feelings warm, my understanding keen. Let me drive out of myself the universal madness to be elsewhere in search of the joy of life, for the joy of life resides within oneself. Let me universalize my sympathies, let me understand the young man eager for money, the young poet eager for beauty, and all youth eager for love. All this here in this dear city of my birth.

Max Ehrmann was completely dedicated to his work for which a quiet life was necessary. From without, his life seemed uneventful. Within, he lived in constant adventure. After leaving the business world he had regular hours for writing, study and recreation. Mornings, in his beloved "Little Rooms," he wrote at the beautiful table made by his father. But his most cherished hours for writing were in the midnight silence. Afternoons, under the beech trees of Deming Park, he would often sit listening to the silent voice within—that inner voice which Balzac said "supports a man of gifts in his moments of despair." Here in the quiet woods he often found the peace of soul that he brought back to the confused world in his poems. Contemplation of the great forests, green fields, and quiet streams gave him serenity. It was natural, therefore, that he disliked travel. Yet he spent many winters in Florida visiting his brother Emil, several months in Denver, and went often to New York. Best of all he liked, through all the years, a cabin in the woods at Turkey Run where, in the shadows and silence of the forests, he could explore the trails and think and write.

June 30, 1922.—Turkey Run. Here, surrounded by all this beauty, I am washing myself clean of all the mental dust of the city. I feel again the hurt of immortality and of gentle



things. Here in this lovely place, beneath these mighty trees, I wash myself of the dust and debris of our mob-life. We are creatures brief. The sight of nature's artistic embellishments, wrought through thousands of years, calms me. I, too, am the handiwork of nature. I, too, am brother of these trees . . . Sitting here, I see how bruised of soul I am by the incessant hurly-burly.

May 4, 1932. — For three days this week I took my animal to the forests of Turkey Run, and gave it exercise, fresh air, healthful food, a sight of the starry heavens, and noiseless nights of undisturbed sleep. Talk of investments, academic theorisings and conditions of business grew dim in my mind as I walked under the giant trees by day and at night looked at the stars a long time. I came out of the forests much healed.

Max Ehrmann was always an out-door person. He used to say: "I must keep my animal exercised." In his youth it was swimming and tennis; then with the slowing years it was golf and archery. In his Journal he wrote: "My recreation now consists of watching sunsets and sunrises, moonlight walks, and golf." He loved the Wabash, the gentle, slow-moving river bordered with lofty sycamores, where he often lingered.

June 11, 1917. — I have just come in from a long walk. After I had gone a mile I looked around, and there was a dog. I tried to frighten him away by the usual "shoo" which I believe is dog for "go away." He retreated but still he followed. I began to talk to him. I bought him a sandwich which he ate like a tramp. I thought, "Now I'm rid of him; he's had his dinner." But no, he really adored me now. Over and over he thanked me. I stroked his fur. He was all gratitude. I could not abandon him for he had faith in me. I have just now given him a bowl of water, food and made a bed for him in the hall.



I feel honored to have been selected by this dog to be his patron. But what will he think of me if the janitor puts him out in the morning?

June 12. — It happened. Dog, bedding, and bowl of water are gone. It must be quite an art in the dog world to attract and hold patrons. And yet he may be *en tour*, and wanted lodging for the night only.

November 10, 1935. — Today when I went out to the archery range everything inside me seemed leaden. But after arching a couple of hours I was renewed. My lungs, liver, and heart thanked me for giving them an opportunity to live again decently and naturally. We were a happy lot driving back to town. Now, after a good dinner, all the aggregation of me inside is at peace and ready for sound sleep. I am sure my lungs, heart and liver are not interested in my books. They do not even know I am an author. But I think they are keenly interested in my archery.

September 5, 1931. — Today I drove in the country. How wonderful the cattle! They do not keep late hours. They are not saturated with nicotine. They do not get drunk. They eat what they need and have done. They are content to do that which nature requires, and no more. They know neither chastity nor over-indulgence. They are not anxious and have no regret. They do not distress themselves with acquisition, nor with curiosity. They go placidly and are self-contained. Are not these the qualities we human beings now strive vainly to attain? But who wants to be a cow? If they knew our bewildered estate, as little would they want to be human.

January 4, 1934. — A friend of mine has at his stud farm an ass, grave, contemplative, serene. Today we looked upon each other. What a rebuke to me! He travails not neither concerning the destiny of man nor of the cosmos. I walked away wonder-



ing in which of us really the assininity inhered. Of course he is neither grave nor contemplative; but he is serene.

April 28, 1931.—This afternoon I drove into the country and thought, "What—is it possible that this stillness, this peace has been out here all the time!" In our blood is bred a million years of familiarity with this stillness. The grass of the meadow, the cattle grazing on the upland, the plowman in a distant field—these sights to the harassed tradesman have but detached interest. Yet many middle-aged, feverish business men were in their youth wanderers in the woods and gazers at the moon.

All this recreation he varied with long walks—often thirty or forty blocks—during which there was opportunity for observing life and talking with his townsmen. "I Ponder On Life" shows of what he was thinking.

"Mr. Ehrmann has elected to remain a citizen of his native town," said an editorial in the *Terre Haute Star*, "rather than migrate as do so many writers. He is one of us, a quiet, unassuming, kindly man, with all the vision, hopefulness and ideals of the poet but with none of the temperamental whims so often looked for in this class of writers." The *Terre Haute Spectator* wrote: "Poets are popularly supposed to be long and lean and hungry looking and wear their hair long. Mr. Ehrmann is neither lean nor long, does not look hungry or wear his hair long. He is just a good fellow who gets as much out of life as any person who writes things that make people sit up and think." And the *Indianapolis Star* after an interview wrote: "Max Ehrmann is one of the most affable and likeable of men but above all else he is a student of the deep problems of life. He likes solitude and the opportunity it offers for meditation. Yet if ever there was a mortal who loved mankind it is Max



Ehrmann. This is manifest in his writings. His ambition is to convey the visions of beautiful things in life to others who have become blinded by the sordidness of material things. He said to me, 'My hunger has been to write something beautiful to lift the soul out of the ugliness of life.'

A broadcast from Indiana University in 1943 about his life and work commented: "Max Ehrmann often can be seen walking on the streets of Terre Haute, for long walks are one of his favorite diversions. Mornings he works in his study, afternoons found him in his younger years playing golf at the Country Club and now in later years he enjoys his archery at the Max Ehrmann Range in Deming Park. He is filled with an unquenchable curiosity to learn all that life can teach him. He wants to look behind the pictures of the panorama of knowledge. Those things he learns he offers to the world—a new philosophy or perhaps an old one written with a new beauty. He is a quiet philosopher whom his townspeople hold in high esteem."

One of his close friends has given this appreciation:

ERNEST ALDEN

It was my good fortune to know Max Ehrmann intimately for over forty years. During this long period of close friendship, I learned to admire him as I have admired few men. He was a man of extreme modesty and refinement. Although he had strong, well grounded opinions on all matters of public interest, nevertheless he showed a patient attitude and courteous respect for the opinions of others. In every situation he was first of all, a gentleman.

It is difficult to think of Max Ehrmann as having been at one time a deputy prosecuting attorney; it was not because he enjoyed that type of work but because he had to make a living.



The writer of the inspiring *Prayer*, filled with the spirit of brotherly love, especially for the unfortunate, associated with a public prosecutor whose duty it was to try to send men to jail!

Without doubt his deepest concern at all times was for those whose lot was less fortunate than his own. In our talks and in most of his writings his uppermost thoughts were centered on doing something to help others and bring peace and contentment into their lives. Nothing seemed to give him more happiness than to be told by his readers that he had raised their standards of thought and had pointed out to them a finer and nobler way of life.

Of all men, Max was a man of peace. War was abhorrent to him and caused him much mental suffering. Recently he told me he could not concentrate on his work because of the turmoil throughout the world. The beautiful and inspiring poems, *A Prayer*, *Desiderata*, and *Thou Whom We Call God*, give expression to the innermost thoughts and ideals of the real Max Ehrmann. They preach gentleness, forbearance, and courage, and have done much to alleviate the pangs of despair which so many persons are now undergoing.

Recently when I asked him to summarize his philosophy he replied: "That would be difficult. But I can say, the world is beautiful and abundant. What there is of sorrow and misery is not due to the gods but to the evil and ignorance of man. We are not fallen gods. We are rising brutes." In other words he said, "It is up to us."

On his usual daily stroll he often stopped in to see me. These visits and his gentle, friendly personality are memorable recollections of my life. How appropriate are his beautiful lines:

"To be loved in life is life's greatest gift. To be loved in death for some bit of beauty one has given to the world, is to



take from death some of its sting. It is a busy world, and often we think it a hard world. It has need of all the charm of word and sound, of color and carven stone that love can give it."

Max Ehrmann was a cheerful man. He was never cynical nor did he distress others with his own dark days. "We all are radiant enough upon the street but the shadows lie within." His own frequent sadness or deep discouragement he did not inflict upon others, but in the pages of his friendly *Journal* he found relief.

Softly he spoke his own opinions, listened patiently to the rich man's smug certainty, tolerated the unlettered man's glib assertions and easy opinions, knowing well we all are on our way up from the jungle. "Listen to others, even to the dull and the ignorant; they too have their story," he says in *Desiderata*.

August 6, 1927. — If you are rich, everything you do is right; if you are poor, little you do is right. This is the law and the profits.

October 25, 1933. — Today a communist, a socialist, and I had a talk. Both asked me where I stood. I said, "I favor a movement toward the Left provided it be founded upon education and not upon violence; and it might be well to leave something of the profit motive."

December 27, 1934. — If you are a socialist, the communists will hate you; if you are a communist, the socialists will hate you; if you are either, most of the rich will hate you; if you are neither, some of the poor will hate you; if you are a republican, some democrats will hate you; if you are a democrat, some republicans will hate you. No matter what you are, you will have enemies. Bear them with equanimity. Hate no man. If you must hate, hate unjust institutions.



He liked to talk to young people about their plans and ambitions and wanted to give them encouragement; from his own experience he knew how little their finer ambitions are appreciated and how ill-prepared they are for the actual world. Nearly always young artists are poor, and it is profoundly discouraging for artistic ideals to adjust themselves to our rigid economic pattern. He learned early that, like everyone else, the young writer or artist must earn his own living. "Learn to live in this world as it is," he says in the *Journal*. True, that compromise with his talent is hard to make and the flame of his talent might later burn less bright. But in those years he could be learning about life at first hand—so essential for any artist. And if poetry was to be the framework of what he had to say, through these years he could be learning also the technique and the discipline of his art.

Often he was visited by young men for they knew he would be honest with them. He encouraged countless young people working at uncongenial tasks while stifling their creative energies. He knew the bitterness of that struggle.

August 16, 1934.—I was walking on the way, sad with the failure of life. A young man caught up with me. His mind was full of the rainbow, and his speech was of hope and dream. "I will convert this foolish boy. I will tell him the truth," I thought. But I could not tell him for he told me I was a great poet. We parted, he as mad as before with his rainbow and music and I, a good deal mellowed.

January 26, 1919.—Sunday. I took a long walk this afternoon. The air was balmy and the sun shone as warm as in the month of May. On my way back, I passed the girl who several months ago brought me some of her poems for criticism. She pretended not to see me. The poems were very poor, but she had poured her heart into them; my cold criticism, I see now, had pained her. I am sorry for she is young, ambitious



and full of feeling. She had wanted sympathy and encouragement. I had taken her literally and given her only unfavorable criticism. I remembered my own earlier desire to create. If we could but remember, as we grow older, that youth needs sympathy and encouragement; for criticism is cold and concerned with rules, while sympathy has heart and encouragement has faith. I wish she would come back to me with more verses, for as years pass, though we gain in insight we lose in hope, heart, buoyance. She had all these. She might have left me richer had I remembered that I, too, once was twenty and just beginning.

June 14, 1922. — Very few persons who bring or send me their verse or prose have any knowledge of the art of composition. As for the technique of verse, hardly one has troubled himself to study it. Then there are the letter writers who engage in correspondence about nothing. What must be the experience of writers really well known! Riley once told me that he never answered letters. This seems rude. I fear to discourage some really worth-while ambition. The public should not disturb us too much. If it has found help in our work, it should tell us in a word or a smile. It should do at least this, for we too are often heart-hungry and discouraged. It is a nice point of manners to stroke us without breaking our backs.

September 10, 1931. — Many persons bring me their poems for criticism. What they really want is praise and a publisher. Plato had over his door, "Let no one enter who is unacquainted with geometry." I should like over my door, "Let no one bring verses who is unacquainted with poetic technique." Most of those bringing their verses know nothing of any requirement for poetry other than a bubbling in the soul. It is a difficult position. If I find fault they fancy me belittling the noble, inner stirrings that prompted them. Little do they know how highly I rate these inner stirrings — almost the only path left by which we sometimes may wander out of a mechanically enslaved universe.



April 28, 1934. — A young woman called on me today with a bundle of her manuscript poems. She was beautiful; but her mind, like her poems, was infected with the whirligig culture of our age of restlessness and pessimism. She could scarcely sit still and her poems had something of the same restlessness. To her I preached repose, the unperturbed centers of personality, all in vain. Only life, with its thrusts and buffetings, can teach the young.

Bruce McCormick, in his young newspaper days, knew Max Ehrmann well, a friendship that continued through the years.

BRUCE MCCORMICK, *The Terre Haute Star*

One of the most enduring qualities of Max Ehrmann was his intense and constant interest in the aspirations of young writers — or rather, perhaps, in those who wished ardently to become writers. Occupied as he was with his own pen, books and thoughts, he always could find time to push aside his work and to talk at length with young men in search of the path to a career in writing.

Mr. Ehrmann's rooms — which were marked with the atmosphere of the retreat of scholar, philosopher, poet — were only a few steps from one of Terre Haute's daily newspapers, then staffed by a group of young men, all eager to write and sure of their destiny, all touched with excitement about the books, authors and the literary trends of the day. I was one of those young men.

They were drawn to the poet by his genuine interest in their daily stints of newswriting. He retained throughout the years a sharp appreciation of events of local nature, past and current, suitable for "feature stories," and he freely suggested these ideas to the young men of the paper. Their development of his suggestions in print never failed to elicit from Mr. Ehrmann generous appraisal and encouragement.



As a consequence, they often sought to repay his interest with articles about Max Ehrmann — his most recent work, his ideas on problems of the time, the recognition accorded his writings, reviews of his activities, summaries of the poet's correspondence with the great figures of stage, literature and the realm of ideas. Within the frame of their local publication they sought to paint a portrait of Max Ehrmann, to bring his ideals and the music of his words forcefully to the attention of his fellow townspeople.

More than one of our news staff, discouraged by the seeming blind alley in which the youthful aspirant to literary acknowledgment struggles, turned their steps frequently to the quiet charm of Max Ehrmann's book-lined walls, easy chairs, his genial friendship and encouragement, interrupting no doubt the poet's flow of meditation and work of greater moment than a young man's need to be heartened. They often left with the firm assurance of the poet, "You can write." And they tried.

It would be pleasant indeed to record that some of them — even one — fulfilled the poet's belief in their abilities with work widely acclaimed. In reality, however, they remained unknown to the world at large. But in the years and decades later, I think none forgot or was without gratitude for the understanding and sympathy with which Max Ehrmann received and nurtured the ideals and hopes of youth. None ever will fail to remember the haven of the poet's rooms or his refurbishment of their dreams.

It was my privilege many years ago to have published the following appraisal of Max Ehrmann's vision and though it may be touched with a youthful writer's excesses, it also surely is touched with some truth:

"To Max Ehrmann has been given understanding and insight and the power to impart in poetry the life his vision embraces. There is little wonder that his dreams and ideas should



not be found on the tongues of the many, who cannot conceive what possibilities so lucidly unfold before the poet's gaze, what great advances are marked by him for man's achievement. One poet has written of his brothers that although a great power has given to poets their flaming hearts and brains and the gift of song, that same great power has not endowed men with ears to hear the song of the poets; so all poets inevitably are not understood and seldom appreciated.

"That Max Ehrmann should choose to pass his life in Terre Haute is not strange but only evidence that, remote from the manias of the great centers of humanity, the poet wished to live calmly in familiar and loved places. He describes the tumult that rages abroad and even while deploring that tumult he holds a great and quiet hope of its cessation. He has celebrated Indiana in verse of distinction as a calm sphere removed from sectional strife, in which the heartbeat of the nation is sound. 'Compassionate mother of a people free.' 'The turmoils of the world touch lightly here.'

"In another poem his city, Terre Haute, is invested with the romance which is life, throbbing in accord with the life of the world. Here Max Ehrmann is secluded as in a tower and he gazes out over life with compassion and understanding but above all with hope. He desires to see mankind correct the abundant errors at every hand. 'Ethical, spiritual life has not kept pace with the great modern material progress,' he has said. 'Life is still under the old regime. The spiritual life, all that is not material, must be brought into direct connection with this material growth.'

"It is his belief that the tendency to exalt material grandeurs, so prevalent in periods of unusual material advances, is destructive. He would see a dawn of calm reason and kindly naturalness. He has asked in *A Prayer*, 'May I not forget that poverty and riches are of the spirit.'



"Max Ehrmann possesses spiritual riches in his lofty interests in life and in his contacts with the great names of his contemporaries found in their letters to him. They have found his work full of beauty and primarily a vital quest for the quintessence of life. Many express gratitude for his books, but in none are couched only platitudinous thanks. In all are to be found delight and interest. Thus becomes incalculable the effects of Max Ehrmann's dreams of a future reality."

To Max Ehrmann his birthdays were always serious occasions, for memories, for looking freshly at life, for making new plans.

September 26, 1924. — Today is my birthday. As usual I have thought much of my mother. Stop, Life! Do not run away. I have not yet found out anything.

September 26, 1931. — Today is my birthday. I am growing older — the end of many things; many illusions of my youth are gone as must be with those who think; I see a dumb, blind though often superbly beautiful nature; I am surrounded by shadows and it is dusk in the soul. What is on the other side of the shield? The consciousness of having striven for the light, of having lent a hand, of having worked less for money than for beautiful dreams. The memory of having witnessed everywhere a noble heroism; also of having witnessed the great chaos, the great phantasmagoria. Above all, the memory of dear companionship and love. Any appraisal of life must in all intellectual honesty comprise both aspects.

September 26, 1936. — (midnight) Today there is a notice of the fact of my birthday in the morning and evening papers. A number of persons took my hand today and wished me well. This evening a local broadcasting station gave a program of my poems to musical accompaniment — superbly done. I spoke a few words of gratitude at the end of the program. What would I do without the affection of my townspeople? Several times in



younger years I tried to live elsewhere; but always I came back. Time, swift Time! The praise of my friends and neighbors has been sweet to me. Dear friends here at home, you will never read this but in my daily walk I will try to tell you of my gratitude for your affection. It has been a happy day.

Of his interest and affection for elderly men he wrote often in his Journal. From them he wanted to find out what they had gotten from life and with what faiths and beliefs they faced the final days.

December 4, 1928.—From early manhood I have had friendships with old men because I thought they, having seen most of the play, had worked out some meaning to the plot. These friends were rich in experience. The history of our country always had fascination for me and they had lived through the Civil War period. I remember especially two of these old fellows in whom there was a kind of "luminous silence" and tranquillity. Purposeless volubility and inner agitation are unbecoming to age. To speak one's truth quietly and to be undistraught in old age is a considerable portion of the wisdom of life.

August 15, 1934.—I have tried to find out about life especially from the writings and conversations of elderly persons. What does this passenger think of the voyage when nearing the end? One thought recurs in these tales: one should be unafraid; one should not be much distraught by life; one should be little perturbed, take without bitterness what troubles life inflicts, and accept with a grateful mind the gifts she offers. Serenity. The old know that peace, the still soul, has value for life.

Max Ehrmann lived simply and even austerely. He never wanted fame or money. He shunned publicity. He did not



care for "things," but if one offered him a thought he was interested. Often he sacrificed his comforts to his beloved work. His poem, *The Tradesman and the Poet*, shows his inner wealth.

Journal. — I think I would give the doubtful joys of an uncertain after-life for the privilege of seeing this earthly performance over again. To be young again and free and to be passionate for all things, to look again upon the world with bewildered joy, to want everything and think it attainable, to love the weird, strange beauty of the night and the things of love that belong to the night and all the precious strands of which love is woven! . . . then the years of labor and the years of some achievement. And last, even the years of disillusion, however once bitter, all — all are beautiful in retrospection. In youth one dreams of the triumph of maturity; in maturity one embellishes the past with a thousand charms. Memory mellows everything.

"Whatever I have written in my Journal about friendship and affection has come from a calm and perfect friendship. We worked it out together," he wrote in his Journal. Both of us were deeply interested in the world in which we lived and in the work we did. Our interests complemented and sustained each other. His special interests were in philosophy, literature, science, all life; mine were in history, sociology, and the problems of women and young people. He had his work; I had mine. Always we discussed our work and our plans. He gave me many wise words about life and young people which I passed on. His need for a quiet life and solitude for his work I understood; he understood my love for my little institution.<sup>1</sup> Both of us were concerned and troubled with world problems but always there was a refuge. We had each other. To this beauti-

<sup>1</sup> The King Classical School, for forty years a private day school in Terre Haute.



ful friendship and marriage, Max Ehrmann gave a deep understanding of life and the tenderness and richness of a beautiful personality.

Journal.—Make a place in your mental life, where with one beloved you may repose. Camaradie, common ambitions, talk of beautiful things will bring you peace . . . To have loved some one, to have dreamed, to have had hours of ecstasy under the stars — these are worth the price that life exacts . . . To love and be loved is to be fortified against the onslaughts of fate . . . When love comes to fine natures, there is gratitude that is like prayer. Surely the thing must be something more than human. Surely the gods have sent a gift.



## Chapter 7

### RECOGNITION

*Is not this to have entered the doorway,  
And to have dwelt in the House of Fortune?*

— THE HOUSE OF FORTUNE

On Sunday, June 24, 1945, an impressive Recognition Program, a tribute to Max Ehrmann, was given at the Swope Art Gallery in Terre Haute. Professors, musicians, scientists, artists, and other friends gathered to do him honor. Many tributes were given to "The Man" and "The Poet." The Recognition, inscribed on a beautiful, illuminated scroll, was read and all acclaimed the words of the testimonial which was presented to him. He was deeply affected.

### RECOGNITION

*A Greeting to you — Max Ehrmann —* from a little company of those out of all your acquaintances who feel they know you best. We would have you hear straight out from us how we admire you — which we think is not without its importance — and how our admiration is warmed by affection passing back and forth between us — which you, being a poet, will think is far more important.

*Probably* you have not the faintest suspicion that in almost every gathering a certain glow sets you up amongst us. You have come to be lamplighter for us, unassuming, not dressing the part, yet igniting whatsoever good there may be in us; and when you have moved on we reflect that the stuff in you that



kindles us is a compound of kindly thinking, and manly courage, and love of the beautiful.

*No wonder* that one day you awoke to a consciousness that you were to be a poet. You commanded it of yourself, you bent yourself to its discipline, and Poetry set about making you as you set about making Poetry. That is the way of Art. We think we work at it, but all the while it has been working at us, until only the Great Poet can tell which was maker and which the thing made.

*One thing* we know about you that you could never learn of yourself. We come upon you oftener than you would ever believe. Now we find you in the Library of a little town; now you are on the shelves of the rich and powerful; now you hang on the wall in a farmhouse. Your mind and heart have been multiplied — and they never lose their freshness, though the book be opened and the poem conned through all the four seasons.

*We usually* let it be known — we trust it is without boasting — that we come from Terre Haute, which is in Indiana, in the U.S.A.; and every now and then there is an ascription of merit to us because the others to whom we are talking know the town as the place from whence your poetry went forth to them.

*So, Good Friend and Good Poet*, we make occasion to greet you and acknowledge our debt to you. We rejoice in you as an influence. We thank Providence for you in behalf of our dear children, trusting that they may come to know you as we know you, that through your writings they may sense the cadence, the music, and the imagery of poetry.

*Believe that from us, Max Ehrmann*, and you will see how gratefully we sign ourselves

*Your Friends*<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Written by Dr. Allen M. Albert, Director of Swope Art Gallery.



## EDITORIALS

*Terre Haute Tribune*

1945 — "Terre Haute citizens on Sunday took time out to pay their respects to Max Ehrmann, author and poet. Mr. Ehrmann has become a Terre Haute institution, and has brought cultural notice in this direction. Some of his famous works such as *A Prayer* and *Desiderata* and others have long been recognized in the literary world. Pondering his works now it can be seen where Mr. Ehrmann had prophetic vision of many events which have gone into history in the last two score years. There is a singular vein in his writings in which the vast human adjustments which have occurred have been projected, and long ago his works were appraised for their value in this respect. Some of his prose works will take their place among the best of the moderns. His language is noble English, his themes are expertly conceived and he must take deep gratification from the respect with which his efforts have been received. It is well that he is made cognizant of the appreciation of his fellow citizens. The honor paid to Mr. Ehrmann is but small tribute to the distinction he has brought Terre Haute."

1911 — "Mr. Ehrmann has attracted the attention of students and critics by his artistic efforts. Strong sermons abound in his work and in a deep under-lying motive he calls attention to human frailties interwoven with sympathies for the less fortunate."

1934 — "Friends of Max Ehrmann — lovers of his literary gems, respect his genius and revere his kindly ways, his inspirational philosophy, his attitude of facing the joys and sorrows of life with understanding."

1938 — "Today DePauw University paid Max Ehrmann the highest compliment that a college can pay a person in conferring upon him the degree of Doctor of Letters. Mr. Ehrmann's



literary achievements and the reflected glory enjoyed by his home town are a constant source of joy. His lightest works bear an unmistakable mark of intellectual attainment and from his more impressive works students of letters may take inspiration. Mr. Ehrmann might be called the 'poets' poet.' In thought, language and composition his poetry bears the distinction of skilled literary work and these graceful and polished products in content and craftsmanship rank with the works of literary genius."

*Terre Haute Star*

1905 — "The people of Terre Haute take no little pride in the literary work of Max Ehrmann. His poems are subtly beautiful and altogether impressive, suggestive of the delicacy of the poetic touch of Stephen Phillips. His poems appeal to the innate goodness of us all. The reader glows with higher ideals and nobler feelings toward his fellow creatures. His poems keep a man reminded that there is something in the world besides selfish strife — goodness that is more valuable than gold or silver. These poems act like a tonic on weakened ideals."

1922 — "*Jesus: A Passion Play* by Max Ehrmann, published at the same time in New York and London, has given Mr. Ehrmann a standing of importance in literary circles of England. Such literary productions do not become best sellers but they do find a cherished place in the libraries of students and lovers of fine drama. Mr. Ehrmann has reason to be proud of the work he has done. His books and poems have gone forth bearing an inspiration to cleaner thoughts and better things. The city is proud of Mr. Ehrmann. It loves the poet, not only because he is a poet but because he is a man among men and joys in the every day life of the conscientious worker."

1924 — "London and New York as well as Terre Haute



know Max Ehrmann as a poet, dramatist and philosopher, a clean living, clear thinking artist. Max Ehrmann's personality, whether on the printed page or in the quiet, firm grip of his handshake and the steady, kindly glance of his eyes, embodies the type of international recognition."

Max Ehrmann died suddenly September 9, 1945. The following is part of a *Terre Haute Tribune* editorial:

1945 — "Max Ehrmann, distinguished man of letters for nearly 50 years, has been represented in the better literature of the nation. He gave himself to the work he loved and made a distinguished name for himself. His works stand out for their high literary merit and a new book by Mr. Ehrmann was always an event noted in literary circles. His poems are examples of fine writing. They are deeply philosophical, written with a significant purpose and have been studied by literary people for their application to the time and the race. Several of his works on war and peace, written long before the recent struggles were even dreamed of, were prophetic in a singular degree and will long survive the author. He depicted the repulsion of civilization on the impact of war and in measured meter told how it horrified humanity. He directed his works toward the disciplining of the race to bring about the banishment of war.

"His general knowledge was imposing and whenever he could be persuaded to address any clubs his effort was after exhaustive study and intelligent consideration. His works were liberal, even ahead of their times. He was familiar to citizens in his daily strolls and he sought inspiration from people. He brought distinction to *Terre Haute* and it was not without appreciation. He was always included among the writers making an impress on their times. His ideas and thinking were away from the casual and routine and in any group he was



provocative of interesting discussion. The things he achieved reflect in an interesting manner what he deemed worthwhile. Those who knew him as a friend will miss him."

Through the years Max Ehrmann had much correspondence with well-known authors interested in his work. In addition to the letters already quoted from in this biography are many from Theodore Dreiser, Cale Young Rice, Elbert Hubbard, Hamlin Garland, Mary Garden, Minnie Maddern Fiske, Mrs. Jack London, Upton Sinclair, and others. Otis Skinner wrote to him: "Already I have been edified and bettered by the reading of your exquisite verse." Another of many letters from Jack London said to him: "Dear Max Ehrmann, Here's my hand across the continent as from one fellow to another fellow, both interested in the same subject and both approaching it from the same slant."

Some of the comments of reviewers and authors as to his contribution to American Literature have been noted elsewhere. A few more are interesting. B. O. Flower, reviewing his writings in the *Twentieth Century Magazine*, declared: "In the work of Max Ehrmann there is an elevation of thought, an earnestness of purpose and a fine moral idealism combined with a passionate love for justice and the rights of man that give special value to every word. In all his work there is manifest heart, soul and moral virility." Rupert Hughes, the novelist, wrote to him: "The foundation of *Jesus: A Passion Play* is clear, cold logic and a finely reasoned plausibility. The spirit is one of heart-breaking beauty. I don't know when I have read anything of more pitiful appeal than the apostrophe of Joseph of Arimathea to the memory of Jesus. There is a kind of noble agony throughout the play that puts it high among the big tragedies. There are rich rewards that come from all your writings." Basil King, the novelist, wrote him: "I could not read



the book otherwise than carefully since the presentation is so remarkable and the interest so intense. I wish I could give the impression the work has made on me. The vivid and yet poetic realism brings it before the eyes of the mind to a degree that I have not seen equalled elsewhere."

From England recognition has been given through the years to his writings as a result of which he was invited to become a member of the Authors Club of London. Among other letters Ellen Terry wrote him: "I thank you for You — for I see you are very good — and I like you very much." Havelock Ellis again wrote him: "Your powerful Passion Play I have read with interest and pleasure. Your *Prayer* has been at my side." In the Poetry Review of London, Harold Monro, the editor, reviewing *The Wife of Marobius*, said: "In this book there is beauty and color in the setting, charm in the rhythmic lines and the grip of real human emotion. It is a book of outstanding merit." Israel Zangwill wrote him: "I have enjoyed many an artistic moment in this interpretation of *Jesus: A Passion Play*. I wish indeed we could have on the stage such symphonic effects and such poetic entrancements. Such work as this must ultimately educate the world in the true inwardness of the Christian saga."

And Claude Bowers has written this tribute:

I recall Max Ehrmann as a young man of exquisite artistic taste, unworldly in his spiritual outlook on life, steeped in the philosophy of Santayana and James, at whose feet he knelt at Harvard. There was great charm in his personality. I am sure he would have fitted in perfectly with the old Concord of Emerson, Hawthorne and Thoreau, better than in the pleasant but materialistic environment of his native city. Yet Terre Haute had begun early to realize it had a choice and unusual spirit. He concentrated his philosophy — for he was primarily a philosopher and an interpreter of the inner thoughts and longings



of the average man and woman—in his superbly beautiful prose poem *The Prayer*, which hangs on the walls of thousands of homes. Few have so beautifully set the inner hopes and aspirations of the inarticulate to the music of moving verse.

His poems were clearly written from the heart and out of his own experiences with life, humanity and institutions. They have a high spiritual quality, and in his prose-poems one is impressed by their Biblical tone—so much thought and feeling, so much dignity, so much simplicity of phrasing. These prose-poems have the timeless qualities of Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, and the sonorous eloquence of the prose-poems of Ingersoll. In them all there is a distinctive religious undertone.

All real poets are interpreters and prophets. Max Ehrmann is an interpreter in that he gives articulation to the inner dreams and longings of the millions who feel but cannot express; and a prophet, since in his poems, written in days when humanity was wrapped in the comfortable mantle of complacency, he foretold the social upheaval that so gravely challenges the present hour. His poem *Revolution* is startling in its foreshadowing of the social revolution now in progress. He had a rare social vision. His passionate humanism, his sympathy with suffering, his hatred of injustice, his contempt for hypocritical pretense, his scorn for the parasites, flame in many vivid lines. Against social injustice he protests in verse as Dreiser in prose, but without the bitterness of the latter. That he had the capacity for righteous wrath, is shown in his fiery excoriation of corruption at a dark day in our own history, and in his devastating denunciation of the unspeakable crimes of the Nazis.

He belonged to the open spaces where free winds blow. His love of nature is manifest throughout,—he sings the songs of fertile fields, of placid streams through green pastures, of star-lit skies, of fragrant gardens. He was a dreamer and he put his dreams in soothing verse. In youth he broke with his



family tradition of commerce and industrialism to dedicate his life to literature. Any biography of Max Ehrmann should have charm for it would be a biography of mind and soul.

In the twilight of his years he was granted a portion of his *Prayer*:

And though age and infirmity overtake me, and I come  
not within sight of the castle of my dreams, teach me  
still to be thankful for life, and for time's olden mem-  
ories that are good and sweet; and may the evening's  
twilight find me gentle still.



## Chapter 8

### HIS MESSAGE

*A lovely dream to make of earth a paradise!  
The times are new, the problems new. Let us bring light,  
Through love and learning make a worthy sacrifice  
For men and women wandering in their hopeless night.*

— CENTENNIAL ODE

"When a man as creative and sensitive as Max Ehrmann will come to terms with the problems before us all, his contribution is important. Here is some thinking in heroic mold. I have tried to read everything of Max Ehrmann's I could find. He is the unusual poet and playwright in Terre Haute." Thus spoke Dr. Preston Bradley of Chicago in a recent broadcast in which he discussed the work of Max Ehrmann and read his poem, *War*.

The life and literature of today offer little solace, beauty or direction to the distressed minds and hearts of the world. Mankind has been so sure of its foundations and beliefs that, with their apparent loss, life seems to many without meaning or purpose. The recent discoveries of science, and the disillusionment from wars and depressions have dealt great blows to all accepted ideas. While many assured beliefs and the poetic entrancements of youth have gone with the years, their place must be taken in maturity by a truer knowledge of the world in which we live and of our small place within — also a nobler faith in the possible goodness of life.



There are poets who do not subscribe to any social functions of poetry, among them they of the school of "Art for Art's sake." Max Ehrmann emphasized the possible social functions of literature. He would not have poetry didactic, but poetry must be aware of *Life*. How to live with oneself, how to live with others, some meanings or purposes in living in this chaotic world—these were his main themes. To the spiritual uplift, the practical ideals, and the beauty and inspiration of his writings, thousands of men and women through the years have testified.

Max Ehrmann and I continually discussed these themes. He had decided opinions as to the mission of the artist. He considered that most modern poetry was sterile in thought and aloof from life in content and expression. Certainly the great ferment in modern thought has had a tremendous impact upon the forms of expression in all the arts. Towards the experiments in new art forms there must be sympathy and latitude. Yet in these experiments Max Ehrmann resented the studied obscurity of thought, the tricks of symbolism and the distortions of line and fact so evidently aimed for the kind of publicity successful in America. Due to our commercial standards and hectic ideals, our modern arts, especially literature and painting, have sunk to unworthy and often ignoble depths.

October 15, 1926.—Mainly for publicity purposes, we are flooded by a sea of masochistic and sadistic art. Literature, sculpture and painting vie in the mutilation of nature, in the defamation of life. To wallow in the mud is as inexcusable in art as it is in life. Yet art should not be photography. To create a mood, within certain limits art may deal somewhat freely with nature; but art should not go beyond nature's possibilities and rarely beyond nature's probabilities. Vulgarly and deformity, dressed up as the real, are now in vogue.

August 4, 1922.—Modern poetry is so inefficacious because



almost none of it is woven into the texture of real life. Our poets need insight and courage to look fiercely and honestly into the face of life; and in the face of life they must see something!

November 2, 1931.—It moves one to pity to see these artists painting monstrosities in the interests of theory. In all the arts, outlandish disproportion more easily attracts attention. To startle, to evoke O's and Ah's, now do the service that formerly belonged to a quest for truth or beauty. Many artists, technically well equipped, say nothing in their works because they have nothing to say. The spectacle of the world with its magnificent suggestiveness, the colorful multifariousness of the inner life, they do not see . . . To them there seems no riddle of existence, no experience beyond the physical. To be livable, life must at times embellish the stark outer world. And to this end art should be an aid.

January 17, 1935.—A vast ocean of thought lies outside all this modern vaudeville literature. I have tried in my later books (none knows better than I how vainly!) to essay some infinitesimal bit of this ocean of thought around the island of man. Adventurers have gone out a little way. Some treasure has been brought back, but nothing in comparison to what must still be out there.

February 17, 1936.—The World War tore up everything. Now more than ever we need truth and standards. Many modern authors belabor the public with book after book, stating in diverse fashions that they know no truth or standards to live by, and that in the wide universe there is not any anchorage; in short, they have nothing to say. Is not this like keeping shop without merchandise in a starving community?

Max Ehrmann also thought that too often the intellectual is the cynic, and that much of the sordid realism of some



writers only portrayed the chaos in their own souls. Of course there is plenty of sordid realism in life but to portray chaos or filth or distortion or degeneracy as though they are the natural and accepted order of things and with no hints of any amelioration showed no mind of a thinker, no hand of an artist. Such "artists" only deepened the gloom and chaos around them. Their works offered no evidence of having searched at the roots of modern life for the causes of our modern confusions, or for help for a stricken world.

The writings of Max Ehrmann show that he felt as deeply as these gloomy artists the tragic realities of our social and spiritual unrest. At times he was engulfed in deep despair.

June 24, 1922. — What inner peace, what refuge is possible in this tormented world? Can anything lead the present tortured world to peace?

December 1, 1933. — Ehrmann, must your life have cosmic significance to be bearable? Vain creature! Live out your day in the sun as a grateful man. Leave the cosmos to the gods. Something is working out. Behold and marvel at the spectacle of man and the world.

Appalled to contemplate the dark pessimism of some modern writers, Max Ehrmann believed that conception of Reality only a small part of the truth. Life is also very beautiful and beauty and courage must be cultivated through the individual human spirit. In *Be Quiet, I'm Talking* he says: "Sainte-Beuve tells how Madame Recamier refused to see evil, even denied its existence. Emerson was of that type. Norton tells in his letters how tired he became of the Emersonian Spring. To refuse to see evil is as dishonest and unwise as to see only the good. Acknowledge evil, look it squarely in the eye, but don't be charmed by it." This thought from *The Modern Temper* of Joseph Wood Krutch he often emphasized: "This world in



which an unresolvable discord is the fundamental fact is the world in which we must continue to live, and for us wisdom must consist, not in searching for a means of escape which does not exist, but in making such peace with it as we may."<sup>1</sup> This philosophy, "to make such peace with it as we may," is the substance of much of Max Ehrmann's work.

On this always debated subject of the social functions of art, Max Ehrmann believed that by its thought, beauty, imagery and sincerity, poetry should arouse a new awareness to life, a new sensitiveness to beauty and new meanings to experience. Poetry should interpret life, express purpose, inspiration and moral conviction, point out some possible meanings of things and find or create some values in living. He was indeed aware of such voices among modern poets — poets who had something to say about the world in which we live — Robinson, Lindsay, MacLeish, LeGallienne, Noyes, Masters, Frost, and Moody among them. But their voices cannot be heard above the shrill commercial clamor nor can their message be read above our neon culture. In an interview in 1935 he said: "American literature should get away from the squalor of realism, sex and dirt, although it was considerably enriched by going through that period. We must get to a finer realism — of the spirit as well as of the flesh. It will comprise a complete picture of life, keyed a little above reality in order to afford a possible ideal for conduct. The truth about life can also be uplifting. The ends of great art are beauty and truth and inspiration. A book should reveal some new charm to delight the soul of man and to enrich the world or it should proclaim some new truths or correct some old errors. That is the way progress is made."<sup>2</sup> And again in *Be Quiet, I'm Talking* he says: "A writer should have a moral bias. He must feel that he is writing in the in-

<sup>1</sup> Permission of author.

<sup>2</sup> *The DePauw Alumnus*.



terests of mankind, in league with the forces of progress. That gives an added zest to his work. And even if he fails both in art and money, he may still lay to his credit the fact that he has striven for social ends."

Like Amiel, Max Ehrmann realized that even though man cannot yet find God, man can think and work out "how to make such peace with life as we may." Artists also, like explorers and scientists, might be pioneers and, freeing themselves from "enchaining events," might sound some call to mankind. Great art should glorify that which makes for the highest development of life. The true poet might somewhat lift the veil. The true poet has thought long and deeply, has behind him a wide knowledge of men and women and speaks with the inner voice — "that voice deep within us all." By this enlargement of the imagination, by its truth to life and beauty and the strengthening power of its morale, true poetry contains in itself something of the Divine. Either there must be some meaning in life that man might find, or man's greatest triumph might be in putting some meaning into life.

October 9, 1918. — As I grow older, I lose more and more of the gravity and hope I had in youth. I understand life better. Nor does nature bring to me, as in earlier years, the same highly articulate dispatches from the center of the universe. I still think highly of nature as an artist, but she is not interested in my aspirations. She is altogether disinterested in moral law. She has beauty but no conscience. But now I have more wisdom. I understand better my own technique of the supreme art of life. I would have my life beautiful no less than my poems. With the years, then, I have gained more insight and more repose.

Max Ehrmann loved life and the contrast between the beauty and abundance of the earth and the marvellous discoveries of



science that have so eased man's daily living, with the picture of man's stupidity and indifference, stumbling through a world that might be beautiful — this contrast filled him with sadness and inspired him to call upon men and women to get about some worthy business of living and service.

A just apportionment of toil's reward should bring  
To man the gift of leisure and the tender dream,  
The upward look that inward prompts the stars to sing  
The wonder of this cosmic, thought-pervaded scheme.<sup>1</sup>

December 24, 1928. — Christmas eve, midnight. I have just come in from a walk. I have seen these candle-lighted windows and Christmas trees on a background of snow for many years. It was most impressive tonight — the cheerily lighted windows, the magic Christmas trees, the white snow, the starry heavens. Peace on earth, good will to men! What a wonderful world if these lights truly represented that noble sentiment! Instead, these lighted houses represent mainly social indifference. The ages-long hope of man for a kindlier life, a gentler world — will it ever be realized? We must believe so. This belief makes a virtue of every forward-looking deed which gives to life a little more dignity. To rise to social consciousness, to live beneficently — these are the sentiments that should glow tonight in all these lights on the background of snow.

To such ideals Max Ehrmann dedicated himself and his life work. He felt keenly the obligation that an artist owes to his time. The artist portrays in stone, or color, or book his thoughts about life, yet he is at the mercy of material conditions. He must first earn his living, yet "the people" care little or nothing for spiritual wealth. The poems of Max Ehrmann are full of the immortal longings of man and the conflict with the hard, cold struggle of getting a living in an indifferent world. The

<sup>1</sup> *Centennial Ode.*



mass of mankind must concern itself mainly with its own struggle for existence and material welfare. But Max Ehrmann never hesitated to arraign the evils of great wealth or the intellectual poverty and smug satisfaction of those freed by fortune from that struggle. His poems in *The Crowded World* and *The Task* show the part he took in trying to arouse social interests.

April 29, 1933.—I was a belligerent radical in youth but as time passed became an ever more peaceful one. The transition might be said to have been from humanitarianism to humanism, a transition in method from force to instruction. What is accomplished by force rarely remains accomplished. The people of a nation may be terrorized and made submissive, but only sympathetic instruction will win their genuine cooperation.

"Max Ehrmann is not only a technician of words," commented an interview in 1940, "but a traveler in the world of ideas. He takes the skeins of daily existence and with them weaves a picture of exquisite loveliness. Yet also in his writings there is a terrible sense of the stern, hard things of life. In all his works he has sought for justice. He says: 'There is somewhere an ideal world, maybe only in our minds, maybe of much vaster content. Let us try to bring at least a little of that ideal-ity into our real world—just now a very grim world.' Max Ehrmann walks the streets of Terre Haute, a quiet, poetic philosopher whom his townspeople hold in high esteem."<sup>1</sup>

June 26, 1931.—In my time I have fought for many forward-looking movements. In the course of these battles fought in my own unbelligerent way, I met many other fighters, some of whom life had turned to bitterest gall, souls who could but darken any cause they espoused. Our hatred of injustice ought often to be sweetened by the love of justice. One cannot,

<sup>1</sup> *Indianapolis Star*.



rather ought not to be fighting all the time. Out there a few miles away, the fields are green with corn and the wheat is ripening. I have seen sunsets that took all the fight out of me. What is the business of man compared to the affairs of the cosmos! We should struggle for the right as we see it; but there should be hours of respite, when we wash out of our souls all the dirt and rancor of the world; there should be hours when, from some eminence in the mind, we seem to speak with the gods and to get back some weird, mystical answer that, though inarticulate, satisfies. The total significance of life is not contained in the heat of the soap box. We ought not to give up the soap box; but on our way home it is good to look up at the stars.

February 27, 1933. — When we have done our bit, breathed our words into the storm, there remains the refuge of order and repose in the inner life.

July 10, 1922. — After-world rewards now being discarded, the very purpose of virtue is that it leads to the happy life . . . To be good for something, and absorbingly engaged in it, is to be happy. Ambition, work, some success and love, these constitute happiness.

In an article in the *Boston Herald* even in his Harvard days he was saying: "Living is man's real profession. If a book brings money it is well. But there is also the necessity of the heart—to give expression to that which we feel to be our essence, the voice of loneliness within that cries out for companionship in things of the inner life; and while forced to live in the outer world, the poet must suffuse his life with consideration and gentleness."

December 21, 1933. — Years ago, when I was a student at Harvard, in the Victorian Age, before the War had mortally wounded all our man-made gods, when most persons thought



of themselves as possible "children of light," I copied in my scrapbook this bit of Victor Hugo: "Deep hearts, sage minds, take life as God has made it. It is a long trial, an incomprehensible preparation for an unknown destiny. In the meanwhile love and suffer, hope and contemplate. Woe to him that shall have loved only forms, bodies, appearances! Death will deprive him of all. Try to love souls: you will find them again."

In Max Ehrmann there was an unusual mingling of the practical and the spiritual. His early experiences in law and business had trained him in restraint and to keep his feet on the ground. The *Pittsburgh Sun* called him "this most interesting of modern philosophers with his honest and well-balanced personality." This combination gave to his writings and observations on life both meaning and enchantment. In his Journal he wrote: "Keep the spirit high above the daily absurdities, and we can relate the inner world to the great realities of the outer world."

Brought up in a Methodist family, Max Ehrmann as a child went to church, Sunday school, and Sunday afternoon "Catechism."

November 5, 1930. — In my childhood God and Jesus lived at our house. My father and mother spoke familiarly with them every day.

September 23, 1922. — What sweet solace the Christianity of my childhood had! God was ever near. One might talk to him, and on occasions hear His voice. His ministers in the church spoke always of His love and care for us. We had but to obey His commandments and all would be well with us, both now and hereafter. In loneliness, in sorrow, or misfortune, one had but to carry his heavy heart to his Heavenly Father and all was made right. It was all so simple, and seemed so unmistakably true.



But the experiences of living left that early faith shaken. All his life he was passionately in search of some faith that would help man to live, comfort his sorrow and be an intelligent guide to his reason.

May 17, 1933. — My skepticism has cost me much endeavor. It is so easy in the world of today to cast away all hope and faith and say, "Life is a delusion and a fraud." Skepticism, the refusal to judge finally, is not a bad philosophy to live by. Its weakness is that so much may be said against it. Life is apparently a sinking ship; yet I rebuff this dark thought by the fact that we are still young on the earth. Through all the ages man has been prone to come to "final" conclusions which subsequent ages have shown to be false. May not our final conclusions be found equally false in some future time? Poor solace! Are we to acknowledge defeat or hope and battle on? How often I oscillate between these alternatives. It is so with us all; one day going about with the inner, low-turned lights and on another day aglow with hope and strong in faith.

October 8, 1918. — Today my brother Albert gave me a marble bust of Dante. Years ago I thought the Divine Comedy a shadow out of the Dark Ages, a hand stretched out of the past, an invitation to return to superstition. So I thought years ago. Now the Divine Comedy is often on my table and I read it with pleasure, for I understand better the historic work which Christian theology has performed. So much for Pragmatism. Dante has left us an imperishable portrait of man's thinking in an historic period. To the eternal question at the pit of consciousness, philosophers and theologians have given many answers. They have photographed the other-worldly reflections of their age. Dante has done no less.

December 11, 1921. — There was safety from the "slings and arrows of outrageous fortune" in that little world of a mother's love. As manhood years have come and gone I have



tried other havens. I have tried the orthodox god and the god of a greater liberality. I also have tried Natural Science. The last is good to live by; but when the heart aches, Science is cold. Philosophy has taught me to bear troubles stoically. It has said: "Remember how all things pass away. There will be nothing of what troubles you now." But that is poor solace. The consolation offered by Beauty is dear to me. The world of nature in her lovelier aspects is a constant solace. In the world of art, be it God's or man's, wrought on sky or canvas, in this world of Beauty I repose.

Always a student of the sciences, especially of astronomy and physics, Max Ehrmann pondered the articles and books of Dr. Harlow Shapley, Dr. Earnest Hooton, Dr. Albert Einstein, Sir James Jeans, Sir Arthur Eddington, and many others—all trying to discover and understand the workings and meanings of the universe. He thought that through modern science mankind is awakening to its place in the universe and that one great function of the poet might be to interpret such findings to the people and express in new forms those discoveries of eternal truths. This Alfred Noyes has done so impressively in his epic, "Watchers of the Sky."

September 8, 1922.—As the years have gone on, more and more I have cast my lot for the practical purposes of living with the living, natural scientists.

It has been said that "Science is concerned with the structure of reality and what it means to man's relation to the universe." At times Max Ehrmann was overwhelmed with the newly-discovered "structure of reality"—the depths of space, the vastness of an expanding universe, the infinity of light years, the trillions of stars comparable to our sun, far-reaching galaxies receding at inconceivable velocities, the sources of



universal energy in atoms, super-galaxies . . . On clear nights he often walked alone to quiet places, looked long at the heavens, absorbed in their beauty, mystery and in his own thoughts. His religion decidedly had a God—the God of Natural Science, the God who made the universe and the stars, the beauty of the earth and the love that made life itself beautiful. Yet as the years passed, more and more he felt the cosmic loneliness of mankind—a loneliness that today the entire modern world begins to realize as it contemplates the terrors of new barbarians upon the march and the possible catastrophes from modern science.

December 23, 1928.—In trying to understand the world and its mysteries, at times I grow weary of reasons and proofs, and for relief I relapse into moods. I know that the moon is a satellite, that it weighs so much, that it is chemically composed thus and so, that its birth was after some certain fashion and that its future will be thus and thus. But what of the lovely dreaming in my mind when I walk abroad of a summer night? What of the resolves I am prompted to make and the assurance I feel?

Even yet to this heart of mine, O Moon, dogging the feet of the earth through the universe, you speak of things not written down in books, nor spoken in the learned lectures of professors. And now will science give us some explanation of these things? These, too, are facts of the universe, facts that stagger us with wonder and longing, facts that move us to move the world, and make us kin of dew drops and of galaxies.

October 27, 1935.—I have been studying the estimates of galaxies by Eddington; there may be a billion galaxies and billions of inhabited planets. There is something back of this whole business, dreamer! What is our earth in this vastness? We humans, who hold ourselves high and speak so knowingly,—what are we? . . . And, little man, if now and then



you think the universe not properly managed, make your protest and recommendation smiling; for even you must see how humorous you are . . .

Man sadly looks upon the heavens, starry bright,  
And wistfully he wonders at the sun's dear light.  
He knows that he is earth and ashes  
That out of beauty soon take flight.<sup>1</sup>

On summer nights we often sat on some high eminence, gazing in solemn silence upon the magnificent stretches of sky, watching the glorious pageant of the heavens. Instead of feeling the nothingness of man, Max Ehrmann maintained his faith in some significance of "little man upon one little grain of dust." Often he said to me: "We may be of no importance in this universe or in the cosmos, but we know we are of importance to those whom we love and we may make ourselves of some importance to our own group and community. For what more could we wish at this stage of man's journey? If some vast scheme of evolution is working out, it moves so slowly because of the deadly inertia and apathy of the still human-animal." In *Desiderata* he observes: "No doubt the universe is unfolding as it should. Therefore be at peace with God, whatever you conceive him to be."

May 20, 1926. — Man's world is young as science reckons. Man is but now shedding his hairy covering at the end of his days of savagery. We are not even yet in civilization.

July 24, 1927. — There never was a golden age. The past is terrible. Man is not a fallen angel but a rising brute. Man has gone forward steadily, slowly. The ideal world lies in the future but it is for man to create. My own notion has been that man himself should continue his evolution. He is on the

<sup>1</sup> *Worldly Wisdom*.



march. No longer at home in the cave he does not yet know whither he is going. Though outwardly hilarious he is inwardly distraught.

In *To-morrow's Spirit*, a magazine article (which cannot at the moment be traced), he analyzed some of the spiritual ills of the twenties with constructive criticism from which a few thoughts, even more fitting to our own confused days, are culled:

"The mental attitude of despair concerning life and the world is universal today, eating like an acid, silently and slowly. It sits in the councils of nations and at the firesides of all people. It is covered in the United States with a thick veneer of lively epicureanism. We are at the beginning of a new era of thought, the Age of Pessimism. Singularly, philosophical pessimism is not incompatible with material prosperity and pleasure. The two go well together; for pleasure distracts a mind sick at the thought of the ill fate of life and the world.

"In all ages man has invented schemes to hide from himself the terrible reality. He may distract himself with the toys of life, keeping his mind childlike, not venturing in thought beyond the borders of dear, familiar things. Or he may grow compassionately helpful, alleviating in others the pangs of fortune. By a supreme endeavor of will, he may live as if indeed the gods were good. No man with impunity may completely deny the ideal. Woven of many strands, life eludes imprisonment in a single formula. The good of life is itself a formula. With the advanced guard of youth and the wars and terrors of our time, the pendulum has swung far from a romantic trust in a loving God. Possibly some future super-humanity may interrogate more successfully the universe as to its purposes and destinies. For the purposes of healthful living, it would seem



that a kind of humanistic patience with whatever faith one can hold is a good philosophy — faith that the universe is unfolding to some purpose in the mind of Reality."

In view of the methods and appalling discoveries of modern science, it is interesting to note the thoughts of Max Ehrmann in 1927 and his reactions to the great enigma. In an article, "Lifting the Veil" in the Harvard Graduates' Magazine, he set forth a theory that the riddles of the universe might be solved by the supermen of science and mechanical contrivances — all in line with the advanced, scientific thought of today. Letters from professors and scientists spoke glowingly of his ideas.

"Anything that helps natural science and the development of future man is right. Anything that hinders natural science and the development of the superman is wrong. Just as we of today are superior to the man-child of hundreds of thousands of years ago, it is reasonable to believe our far descendants will be superior to us by methods equally beyond our mental ken. We are still in the period of speculation, but entering the period of science. Will the superman of the future be able to save himself and his world in that day of catastrophe that men predict? Will he preserve the efforts of all worthy human endeavor during the ages and persist in his own endeavor to lift the veil until he knows the answer to the riddle? Or will he be crushed to nothingness? So far the answer of natural science makes man to shudder and his blood to chill. Shall we describe the coast of Africa because we have in our hand a pebble from the beach at Mombasa? Are our minds, so lately emerged from the jungle, competent to sit in judgment on the destiny of worlds?

"With 10,000 years of domestic selection behind him, and with 10,000 years of the findings of natural science ahead, including psychological discovery, may not the superman in reality lift the veil? Have not the gods already, under the inquisition of test and crucible, been forced to speak and give up



some of their secret? We are learning their language. In the millions of years of life still possible to our earth, we may learn enough to light other fires when the sun is reduced to embers, or maintain our equilibrium should the unequal distribution of cosmic dust among the heavenly bodies rearrange the pull of gravity.

"The world is not reducible wholly to matter or to mind. Both may be real as we know them. Matter is appearing more and more clearly to be energy; and energy and mind do not seem to be as far apart as matter and mind. Perhaps we have not shown the way to the answer of life. But we have shown the place somewhere near where the way begins. And this, in the vast confusion of thought, is not a small matter."

February 27, 1934.—I search my bookcases once more. Could it be possible that I have overlooked any suggestion of the answer, somewhere hidden on a page in one of these rows of books? There must still be hope in a corner of my consciousness for I am ever seeking that answer, something to tie to, to combat the unceasing attacks of futility, something that assures us that all our labors and heartaches for an ideal have a relationship to the universal unfolding. How easily might one give his life for a cause that he knew to be in line with the universal purpose! Century after century we drift, trying this and that religion or metaphysic, often brutal to ourselves in some mad asceticism, expecting assurances that never come. In youth I had an unquenchable curiosity. In age wisdom consists in knowing that nothing can yet be known. Now I seek the wisdom that is unperturbed before the mystery and tragedy of existence.

February 16, 1936.—Science has driven back the mystery to other strongholds and has given relative aspects somewhat understandable to the human mind. I have praised too highly the metaphysical possibilities of science. We live in a mystical



world and we ourselves are a more complicated system than our solar system. There seem to be purposes and ideals outside our wills; the cosmos is so serious. To stand in awe before the universal mystery is part of a good religion.

December 28, 1934. — The mystery of the sky has vastness, beauty and a kind of order, all of which are absent from a view of the total human race. Here are littleness and chaos. But humanity is a part of the cosmos. Perhaps it is for humanity to put beauty and order into its own chaos.

Max Ehrmann often remarked to me: "Neither science nor the arts can solve our moral problems. Why all these billions of people forever reproducing themselves, and religions forever begging some god to solve their problems for them? For this shelving of our responsibilities we pay only in more social problems. Life is not lived unless in some way one unites himself with noble purposes and deeds. Only by putting some serious purpose and meaning into one's individual life can one find relief or have dignity in the disturbed world of today."

March 26, 1928. — The greatest immortality for which one ought to strive is to place oneself in line with the further evolution of the species, and to foster the growth of science; for these factors have elements of durability and may lead us into the presence of the Gods.

In *Be Quiet, I'm Talking* he wrote: "Food, clothes, shelter, amusement, and a little loving — these are the ends of man's self-satisfied existence. Not one person in ten thousand looks about him to see what kind of a universe he is living in. We strut here and there on this grain of dust which, with innumerable other grains of dust, some super-heated, is bounding through the universe at a terrific speed. The stars soften the heart. We too are a part of all this vast magnificence. And



we can think! In moments of exaltation we have believed that the soul goes on. We are finding out that man's body also goes on, perhaps as romantically as the stars. This is not poetry. This is natural science. We can put considerable trust in the God that science is revealing. He is a real God, not man-made but man-discovered. Natural science is giving us new pictures of the cosmos and of God."

Thus Max Ehrmann realized more and more the values of ideals that could be transmuted into service. His reverence for life and faith in living produced a practical wisdom that tried to work out some philosophy for that daily living, for work, for service, for love—always with the background of the beauty of nature and the mystery of the world in the tapestry.

Of metaphysic certitude make no pretense;  
But, silent and in awe, gaze on the cosmic sight,  
Ennobled by humility and reverence,  
As science pushes back the curtains of the night.<sup>1</sup>

With all his love of life, Max Ehrmann thought much about Death—the speeding years, the eternal parting, the eternal mystery.

September 17, 1931.—Remember Death, how it solveth all things. The tender grass. The quiet ground.

January 14, 1933.—Do not be afraid of Death. It may be a beautiful thing. Death is necessary to evolution. We do our turn and pass out. What matter, if we have forwarded a purpose of the Big X, have been an infinitesimal cog in The Great Wheel; and though we know nothing of The Great Design, even we might approve if we could understand it.

The artistry that makes the earth so fair a sight,  
The moon with borrowed gold, and many a caravan  
Of suns meandering along the lanes of night—  
All murmur mystical assurances to man.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Centennial Ode.*

<sup>2</sup> *Centennial Ode.*



Max Ehrmann never isolated himself from the realities of life — from the questions that torment the thinking man. He thought that while some answers might in time be found in the sciences, the inner life also has its realities. Deep in our innermost being, back of all our thought, he believed that our inner self must be a part of the vast reaches of the sky, of the universe, of the cosmos. He was ceaselessly reaching out to penetrate that Reality, that Greater than Oneself. Bertrand Russell has well expressed the impact of such thoughts: "The life of Man, viewed outwardly, is but a small thing in comparison with the forces of Nature. The slave is doomed to worship Time and Fate and Death, because they are greater than anything he finds in himself . . . But, great as they are, to think of them greatly, to feel their passionless splendor, is greater still. And such thought makes us free men . . . To burn with passion for eternal things — this is emancipation, and this is the free man's worship. And this liberation is effected by a contemplation of Fate."<sup>1</sup>

These moments of approach to Reality are truly religious moments. They are found by some in the conventional religions or music or other arts. They are found by others in the contemplation of the grandeur of Nature as did Wordsworth. They are found by still others in the revelations of the microscope or the telescope. One does not think of Albert Einstein, the scientist, in this connection yet his own words illustrate this thought: "What deep faith in the rationality of the structure of the world, what a longing to understand even a small glimpse of the reason revealed in the world, there must have been in Kepler and Newton! — The most beautiful emotion we can experience is the mystical. It is the sower of all true art and science. He to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no

<sup>1</sup> *Mysticism and Logic* by Bertrand Russell. Copyright, 1949, by W. W. Norton and Co., Inc.



longer wonder and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead. To know that what is impenetrable to us really exists, manifesting itself as the highest wisdom and the most radiant beauty, which our dull faculties can comprehend only in their most primitive forms—this knowledge, this feeling, is at the center of true religiousness. In this sense, and in this sense only, I belong to the ranks of devoutly religious men.”<sup>1</sup>

Today the poet must meet not only the challenges of science but of a revolutionary social order. This Max Ehrmann did in his writings, especially in the long poem *War*, published in 1940.<sup>2</sup> Bishop G. Bromley Oxnam again wrote to him: “I find myself strangely moved by the questions that ring out from your poem—queries phrased so exquisitely and poignantly in this very great poem.” Here is the passionate, almost incoherent cry of humanity itself face to face with new realities in a new universe. The conclusion sounds the call:

The Task is ours:  
Let us lift ourselves above our jungle origin;  
For hate and war, substitute understanding and good will.  
Without these, it is the end of the earth;  
And gone will be whatever man has made, both the evil  
and the good;  
This globe of matter will become dust, and roam the  
endless spaces.  
Whatever gods there be, must have witnessed countless  
such catastrophes of worlds,  
Where living creatures' brains outran their hearts.  
Science without love will destroy the earth.

This, then, is the message of Max Ehrmann. Here is a beautiful world in which there is abundance for man's needs. Only ourselves can bring about any better social order. Only ourselves can bring any peace to a world in chaos. We must solve

<sup>1</sup> *Einstein, His Life and Times* by Phillip Frank. Alfred Knopf, 1945.

<sup>2</sup> *Indianapolis Star*.



our own problems. Detachment as far as possible from matters over which we have no control; our duty is to help where we can in the reconstruction and evolution of an imperfect world. Mankind must work out intelligent, reasonable, livable faiths.

Max Ehrmann often wrote of the "dreams" of his youth, his aspirations to write beautiful books. His poems, dramas, and his *Journal* are beautiful books. They are his message of beauty, serenity and wisdom to this generation.

How wonderful is man, how mystic human lives,  
Exalted dust that knows the thrill of consciousness!  
Of all our thoughts and deeds perhaps but that survives  
Which lifts mankind above its inborn selfishness.

To subtle, syllogistic quibbles give no heed —  
The thisness and the thatness of salvation's plan.  
But writes across your consciousness the sacred creed:  
Man's love of God is measured by his love of man.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Centennial Ode.*

THE END



(continued from front flap)

high prudence that has learned to evaluate the physical and the ideal, matter and experience."

*Indiana Magazine of History*

*Claude Bowers*

"There was great charm in his personality. He had a rare social vision. He foretold the social upheaval that so gravely challenges the present hour. His passionate humanism, his sympathy with suffering, his hatred of injustice, his contempt for hypocritical pretense, his scorn for the parasites flame in many vivid lines. Any biography of Max Ehrmann should have charm for it would be a biography of mind and soul."

*Upton Sinclair*

"Max Ehrmann has been about the world, looking with a clear eye, and tells about it with a sharp pen . . . These poems are honest and straight forward and are written by a man who has a grasp of literature and a power of expression."

#### THE AUTHOR

In this short biography Bertha K. Ehrmann has paid a tribute to her husband, Max Ehrmann. She was born in Little Falls, New York and after graduation from Smith College founded the King Classical School, for forty years a college-preparatory day school in Terre Haute, Ind. During these years she has given much time to lecture work with Redpath and Independent Chautauquas, suffrage campaigns and lectures on civic and related subjects. Her book, *The Worth of a Girl*, was published by T. Y. Crowell.



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## The Journal of Max Ehrmann

*Excerpts from letters to Bertha K. Ehrmann*

*Claude Bowers*—"Not only I, but my wife and daughter have read with fascination and delight this Journal of Max Ehrmann. My wife has read it more than once for it is possible to open the book haphazard and find something both wise and beautiful. As Journals go, this deserves to rank with the classics. Let me congratulate you on a fine editorial job. This journal should have good reviews in papers that appeal to intellectual people. A most attractive volume."

*Mark Van Doren*—"I have read this Journal of Max Ehrmann with the greatest pleasure not only for the wise and generous thoughts but for the record it leaves of a man you are to be envied for having known as you did. Everybody must be grateful for what you have done to make that record clear and these thoughts available."

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*Raymond Fosdick*—"I have not had the opportunity to read it through, yet I thumbed it over last night and know it is the kind of book I shall read with the deepest interest. I shall take the liberty of passing it on to my brother."

*Bishop Francis McConnell*—"I have greatly enjoyed this Journal. I read every word of it many times. The excellencies we expect in masterly writing are all there—and other excellencies altogether unusual. There is superlative humility. The marvelous sensitiveness of the author was a vast delight to me. Above all there is a passionate interest in common humanity. There is too a regard for the great man. I could go on and on. This is an extraordinary book for which even the most ordinary of us must be grateful."

*Norman Thomas*—"I have looked over this Journal with much satisfaction and appreciation. The Middle West in particular is in great need just now of more people with a spirit like your husband's."

*Prof. J. M. Brumbaugh* (University of Oregon)—"I have read these memoirs to the last line—an exquisitely fine piece of literature, a spontaneous glow of beautiful, wise and inspiring thoughts."

*Dr. Preston Bradley*—"Max Ehrmann has a message for all times and for all time. His thought is universal."

*Elmer Davis*—"My heartiest thanks for this Journal into which I have been dipping when this rush of politics leaves me time. I particularly appreciate some of the reflections since I am the grandson of a German who always loved his native land but despised its government."

*Lewis Mumford*—"I am glad you published this Journal and am grateful for such a gift from a kindred soul."

*Rupert Hughes*—"I have been hoping to find words to express my continued and enlarged admiration for the prose and poetry of your husband. I have kept this Journal on my desk and dipped into it continually, at random, always finding something wise, beautifully thought out and expressed. There is a wonderful variety of subjects and moods and this book is already a classic. Please believe me proud to possess it."

*Bliss Perry*—"A beautiful piece of editorial work. I dropped all other reading in order to finish every word of it. I regret that I never met your gifted husband for we would have found a hundred things to talk about. I like especially the last ten years of the Journal—he grew steadily with deeper wisdom as a citizen of this puzzling world. I thank you warmly for the pleasure you have given me."

*Stanley Hornbeck*—"This Journal should be greatly helpful to those reaching for the truths and beauty of human existence. I am especially interested in the breadth of his interests, by the humaneness of his reactions to physical and spiritual phenomena. The story of his efforts to 'grow in wisdom' is inspiring as also the lucid sincerity of his recordings. So too is that of his activities as a man and a citizen."



# MAX EHLMANN: A Poet's Life

By

BERTHA K. EHLMANN

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## MAX EH RMANN: A Poet's Life

Any biography of Max Ehrmann would be that of the inner life for above all else he was deeply concerned with the spiritual meanings of life, the social problems of the day and how to live in a distracted world.

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"Max Ehrmann often said: 'Life is not lived unless in some way one unites himself with noble purposes and deeds. Only by putting some serious purpose and meaning into one's individual life can one find relief or have dignity in the disturbed world of today.'"

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